

LABYRINTH

2023



Labyrinth

2023

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Cover Art



“Super Massive Rainbow Hole”

Monica Bond

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“Water Bearer”

Daniel Gajee

Mixed Ethnicities

by Elizabeth Joy Schnur

Mixed ethnicities, a medley of many backgrounds
Like pot-pourri, fragrant and delicate

My family comes from many regions
Both the colonizers and the colonized

Mixed ethnicities running through my veins
How do I interpret this mosaic?

Some searched for a better opportunity
The Statue of Liberty called to them

Answering the call
They boarded the President Lincoln, Hamburg, and Columbus

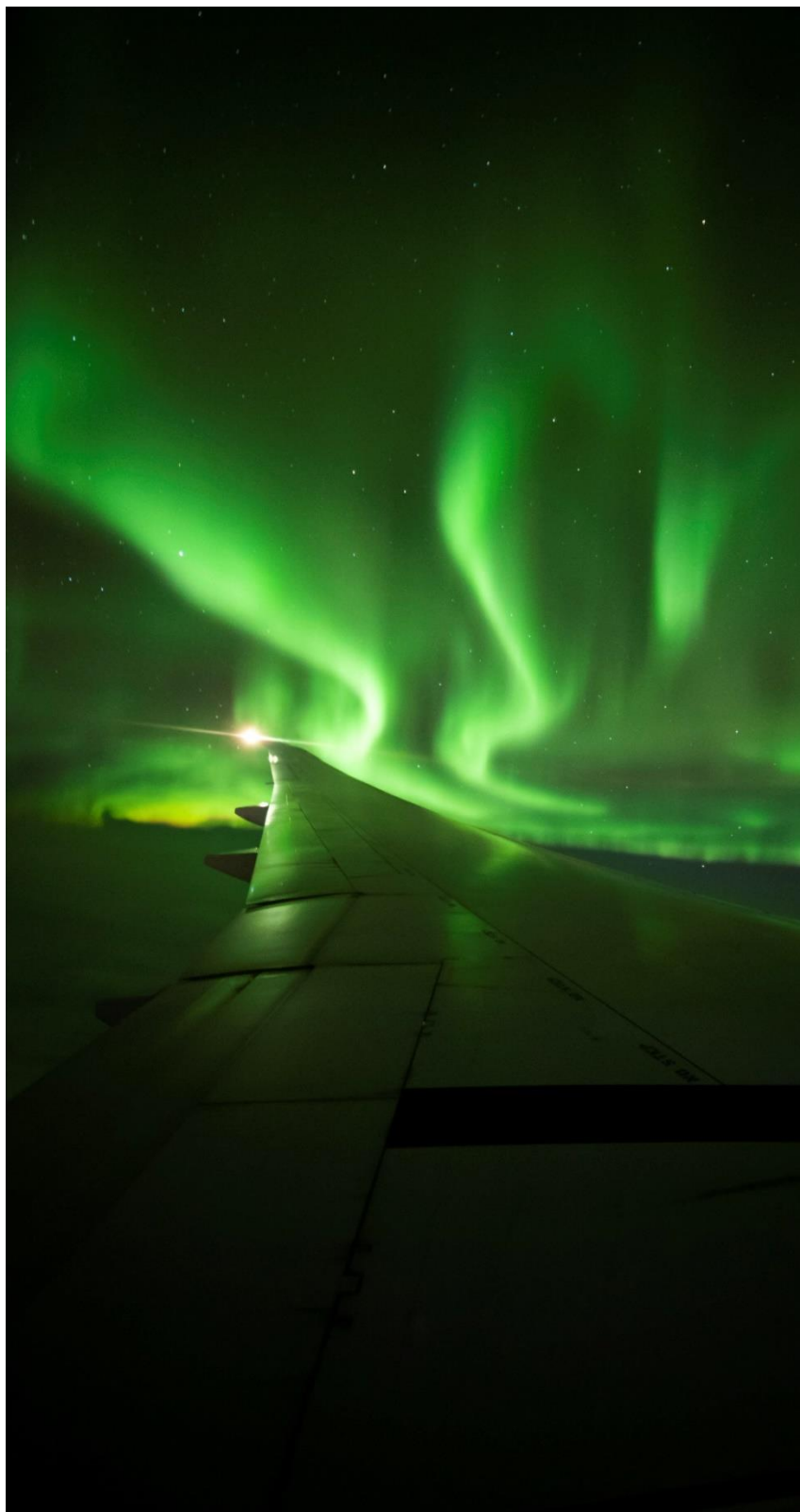
My family, a mixture of traditions and cultures
Italian, Jewish, Irish, Greek, German, Native American

Hybrid identities; are we Italian or are we now American?
Making red wine barefoot in the bathtub in Jersey City

What culture do I resonate with?
Where do I find my identity?

Like a peacock with multiple layers of colorful feathers
I spread my wings, they are vast

Mixed ethnicities, a beautiful medley
Whirling in the wind, a beautiful song and dance



“Lights Over Alaska”
Maximus Kajiwara

A Message to Earth

by Rohan McMillan

It hurts.

It hurts feeling;
Feeling your leaves brush my skin,
Feeling your rain roll down my cheeks,
Feeling your wind push me forward.

It hurts seeing;
Seeing your waves crash against the shore,
Seeing your sun set behind the horizon,
Seeing your seasons paint the land.

It hurts hearing;
Hearing your thunder tear apart the sky,
Hearing your waterfalls rip open ponds,
Hearing your avians call in the trees.

It hurts smelling;
Smelling your morning dew-patterned grass,
Smelling your warning for shifts in weather,
Smelling your sweet perfume of flora.

It hurts tasting;
Tasting your sunkissed running sap,
Tasting your mountainside streams,
Tasting your bitter salt of the sea.

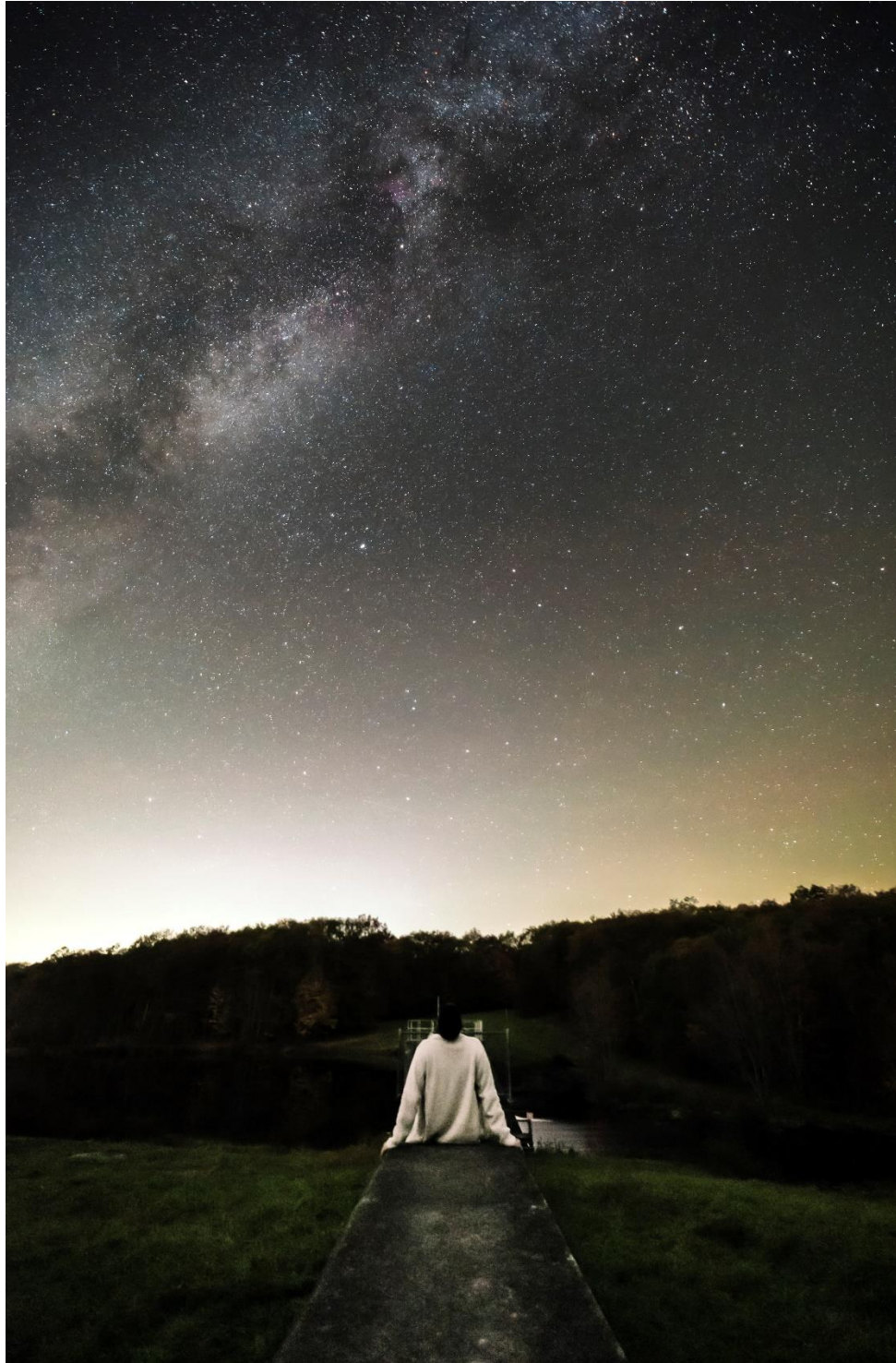
It hurts,
Knowing.

Knowing we uproot your forests,

Knowing we hunt your children,
Knowing we suffocate your lungs.

Yet you still smile at us each morning.

It hurts.



"Stargazing"

Maximus Kajiwara

The Snowless Winter

by Izabella Del Monaco

Engraves the wrinkles in her skin
With another desolately cold night
Yet another midwinter, she is eerily confined to the depths of her mind
And somber in her corner she lays
She prays for another morning light
God please...
Where have your angels flown to?
If only to see even one little opaque star flicker down from His crystal sky
Maybe she would once again find the grounds to delight
Into the heartening prospect that once more
She can use her flutterless wings
And resolutely,
take flight



"The Killa"

Jasmine Hurtado

Requiem Aeternam

By Sariah Sanchez

Grief is the parasite of mortality
It will linger at the back of your throat,
Trapped in the faces of elbows,
In the creases of knuckles, slipping
Just beneath the skin to harvest
At your fated carcass

My Mother told me I had aged
As if it was sin, as if she knew
I would never fit into her lap again
This is what pained her, aged her
Adolescence lost all for a reason
All for a cause, a lesson, a punishment

O' Miseria have mercy for I am just a girl
For the only thing that raised me was
That I am merely a bundle of nerves
Nothing more, nothing less
Than soft pink tissue with
A sullen dense heart.



“Sometimes it’s Better to Leaf Things Dead”

Sarah Burgos

The Hut

by Gunnar S. Holmberg

A woman (Ellie, played by a man, and presenting as a man) waits alone in a forest clearing, facing a small wooden hut located far stage right. She holds a ball of yarn in her right hand. The loose end of the yarn falls down from her hand, tracing along the forest floor and passing offstage under the hut's door. It seems to connect her to something within the hut.

A second length of yarn passes under the door and onto the stage, almost parallel to the first. It trails past the woman and continues into the forest off stage left. The windows of the hut are lit dimly from behind, mimicking flickering candlelight. On the doorknob hangs a sign marked 'OPEN' in an elegant but hasty hand.

A man (Daniel, played by a woman, and presenting as a woman) enters SL. He holds a second ball of yarn in his hand. This is the source of the second length of yarn. He walks uncertainly across the clearing, pauses to glance around, and then looks at Ellie and considers her.

Daniel: Uh... how long?

Ellie: *[Still watching the door to the hut.]* Forty-one minutes.

Daniel crosses SR to inspect the door of the hut.

Ellie: I was here. There is no line, but I was here first. There must be a customer inside.

Daniel: -Oh! Oh, I was just- I mean... *[He takes a step back, then moves SL to "get in line" behind Ellie.]* Sorry. Just, the hours. It looks like she closes in... she closes soon.

Ellie: Oh.

Daniel: I meant to say, how long... *[He looks at her pointedly, then hefts the ball of yarn in his left hand.]*

Ellie: I believe that is my business, and none of your concern. *[She places her ball of yarn in her pocket.]*

Daniel: Alright, then. *[Falls silent, fiddles with his own ball of yarn.]*

Pause. The lights in the hut turn off, then on again. Ellie finally turns her head, looking Daniel up and down before she speaks.

Ellie: Fine. How long, for you?

Daniel: Ten! Ten years, but I think I've always known, somehow.

Ellie: Hm. I suppose. And how did you know? *[Punctuates this by withdrawing her own ball of yarn and holding it out.]*

Daniel: ...How did I... oh. You. *[Sheepishly.]* It wasn't because...

Ellie scrutinizes him.

Daniel: ...Divination. That's how. *[Ellie keeps silent, waiting for him to continue. He sighs, and does.]* I'm Divination. *[He taps a small green badge on his shirt.]* Or I guess I will be. My advisor says I'm lucky and all, it's more practical than Evocation magic, or even Transmutation magic, with it on the fritz or what have you, but I... *[He trails off.]* ...but that's not the point. Sorry.

Ellie: How did you know.

Daniel: ...Divination. *[Smaller.]* That's how. Point is... you never know, right? How these... appointments will go. So, why not get some practice out of it? And my advisor says... well, I'm the most hard-working student he's had. *[Laughs awkwardly, shakes his head.]* Practice, practice, practice. That's what I tell him. It's all academic. Scry with the crystal orb, go see a Necromancer. "I'm sorry, miss- sorry, *sir*, can't resurrect a person that was never alive." And of course you knew that's how it would go, you saw it. But you thought maybe you missed something. Maybe some tiny detail wasn't quite right. Divination isn't always set in stone. *[He pauses for breath. Ellie continues to watch him, her expression softening. When Daniel continues, he seems even smaller.]*

I thought something would be different, this time. Because... it was new, what I saw. It was me, standing in this very clearing after the ritual, but not... me. She's a woman, and she's beautiful. Smiling. Happy. I've never seen that before. I thought... it could only be magic. That I got fixed. Somehow.

So I tried a clarification spell, and I must have messed up after all. Must have read it wrong the first time. The woman I saw wasn't me. The energy signatures didn't match up. And you're the only other person here, so she's gotta be you.

Ellie: *[Silent for a moment, then, unreadable...]* Too many words to say “I know what you are.”

Daniel: Well then, what are you?

Ellie: ...Alchemy. *[With pride. She holds up her ball of yarn.]* Fate’s Ribbon, this is. It is complicated, but the fibers should serve as a natural conductor for Transmutation magic. *[She pretends not to see Daniel’s awestruck expression.]* It also has the power to detect notes of Transmutation magic. To lead the user to its source, and to the destiny it shall bring them.

Daniel: But then, you’re–! *[He holds up his ball of yarn.]*

Ellie: –Yes, yes. I invented it. *[She waves a hand.]* And I see it has caught on. I am glad, indeed. A promising sign, then, that both Ribbons have led us to the same practitioner.

Ellie looks at Daniel. She smiles. Daniel hesitantly returns it. The silence between them resumes, and it is comfortable as they wait.

Ellie: It’s been ten years for me as well. I– *[She is interrupted. The forest goes pitch black. The windows of the hut glare brighter. A booming voice echoes from within the hut.]*

The Witch: No spell components? Merlin’s grimy toenails, NO SPELL COMPONENTS? With Transmutation magic on the fritz, you’re gonna waddle on in here and tell me you brought me no spell components? I could heat my cauldron with your utter audacity! BEGONE FOOL, and darken my doorstep no more!

[The windows flash, then grow dark. A frog croaks loudly. The lights come back up. During the blackout, Ellie’s actor and Daniel’s actress have swapped places on the stage:

Ellie is now played by the woman, presenting as a woman, and holding Daniel’s original ball of yarn. Daniel is now played by the man, presenting as a man, and holding Ellie’s original ball of yarn.

They take a moment, staring at each other first in bewilderment, then in wonder, then in joy.]

Daniel: *[Cautious, fiddling with his ball of yarn. Breaks the silence.]* I think... we’ve been waiting long enough, yes? No point sticking around, if she’s in such a bad mood.

Ellie: *[Catching on]* Right you are. *[She starts off at a brisk walk toward SL, her yarn trailing behind her... then she slows and pauses, turning to face Daniel.]* You coming?



"I'm Here to Speak to You About Your Car's Extended Warrantee"

Monica Bond

Daunting but Deadly Pursuits

by Pasquale Stefano

There is a pleasure to be found
in the tortuous pursuit of an oblivious lover's approval.
What is predetermined torture to many?
May be an anticipation of Christmas to me.
Yes of course it could be a delight.
Although it does not appear wrapped.
It may neither be touched
Nor may your smile wake at first glance
In fact, this present does not have used yet
Like all recipes it requires ingredients
But neither could this ingredient be grasped
Patience will grant you the measurements needed
No, it is not what you asked for
Would you trade the flesh of your foot, for the ferocity of a nail
In exchange for impenetrable skin?
Would you accept the injection of illness in favor of
Bollard-like immunity?
Then if so, why not welcome the doomed love of another
In exchange for nostalgic souvenirs
To be gifted growth of your conscious
To be given chainmail for your heart
Or a chisel to your soul.

Beating Since Birth

By Christopher Martinez

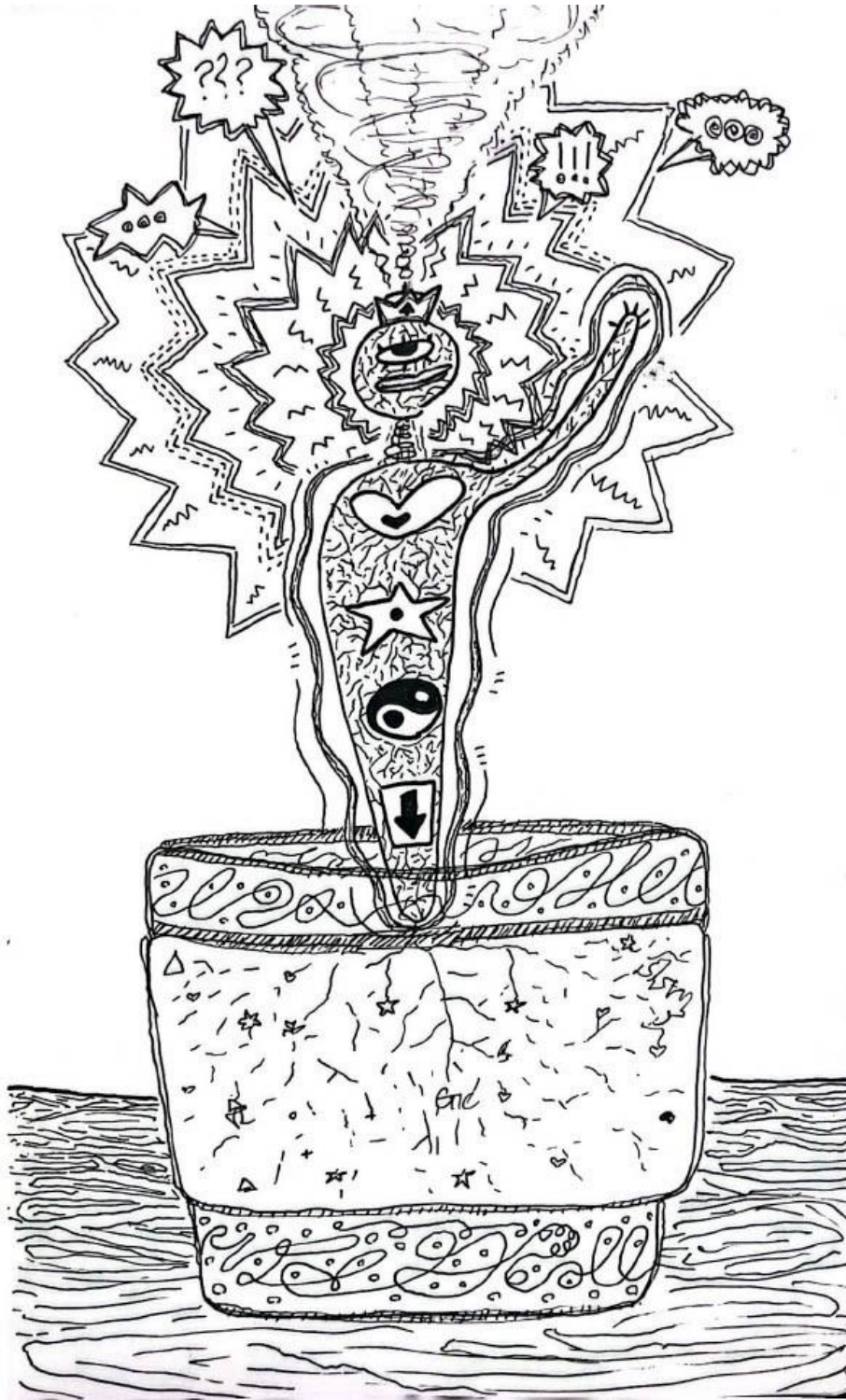
Never once did it give out.
Maybe at times it wanted to
Maybe at times it needed a break.
Pummeled, shattered, and sewn together multiple times—
How could it not give in?

If it would just stop
Perhaps its plump, vigorous vitality would finally acclimate to the temperatures around it.
Maybe it would fit right in.

Cold. Lifeless.

Only one thing can stop it.
Death? Not particularly.
For many have given out far before their time.

My heart.
The only other thing beating since birth.
For as long as it continues
So will my ambition.



“Potted Plant Man”

by Wilson Burke

Arroyo

by Bonnie I. Burns

The arroyo was dry and dusty and spread wide and bowl shaped before me. I stepped over the edge and inched my way down into its depths sideways, putting one foot parallel to the other as I descended into its depths. I moved slowly to minimize the sands shifting beneath my crisscrossing feet. The air seemed even more dry than the sands under my feet. Dry and dusty and hanging heavy over my head, covering my body with a thin film. I continued descending slowly. I wanted to be in the belly of the arroyo and with great care, soon I was.

I had been warned by my Navajo weaving teacher when I arrived at her hacienda never to go into the nearby arroyo, especially during rainstorms. To do so could be a fatal move, as the arroyo was prone to flash flooding during the frequent and sudden summer thunderstorms here in southern New Mexico. The sands could quickly turn to mud and could easily turn to quicksand. I knew the risks as I stepped in. But thoughts of death consumed me, burning in my mind. It seemed appropriate that I should put myself in a place where Death could be very close. Perhaps that would increase the chances of my getting the answers I so desperately was seeking.

I sat down cross legged in the center of the arroyo, scanning the almost round bowl that held me at its core. From where I sat, I could not see above the edges of the walls of the wash that surrounded me. That was exactly what I wanted. I wanted to be in the belly of the beast, the womb, the open sky cavern that could contain and protect me. The moon was high in the night sky above me. Countless stars twinkled above me.

Only a short while ago I had received the phone call from my brothers two thousand miles away at home. "Pop died." My brother's voice still ringing in my ears, still pounding in my head, I had stepped out of the hacienda and into the bleak dark night. My Navajo host reminded me of her warning more sternly, as a thunderstorm was rolling in. But there was no stopping me. I needed to be alone. I needed to be in the desert. I needed the vastness where no one could hear me.

I had already exploded a torrent of tears as I had walked the short distance to the arroyo. But now my eyes just burned and no tears would come. I knew there would be more, many more. But now my eyes were just being stabbed by the sharp twinkling of every star's light. The heavens... Was there such a place? Heaven? Was Pop already there? Or was he still hovering somewhere in-between, some purgatory between here and there. All I knew was he was gone and I had not had the chance to say goodbye.

My stomach churned with a pain I could not locate or define. My legs felt weak curled under me and my head throbbed. My heart ached. A nausea began to rise, but like a tide ebbed away before it could crash upon its shore. I began to howl at the gleaming moon. A sickening, wicked, angry, grief stricken, painful wailing howl. Like a wounded animal, I howled. And then the tears came again, flooding the arroyo like the thunderstorm that was destined to come.



"Fangirl"
Paula Hidalgo

A Painting From You to Me

by Kayla Terese Obed

A special occasion was coming up: my best friend's birthday. One week prior, I asked him what he wanted, and he mumbled, "paint something for me," after his long day of relentless work. I wasn't expecting that response because I had saved up enough money to hopefully spoil him like he spoils me, but my painting had immeasurable value to him. It was one of a kind.

I was fired up, ready to start gliding acrylic across the largest canvas I saved for a special time like this. As I heard him snoring through my phone, sadness rushed over me when I suddenly remembered why I hadn't painted in so long. But nonetheless, I grabbed my dried brushes and old bottles of paint from the depths of my shelf to accept the opportunity he'd given me.

If there was one thing I knew about myself, it was that I was rarely satisfied with what I'd accomplished. I was floating, just trying to get by. There were moments I felt accomplished, but it was only a matter of time before the temporary satisfaction passed like a spring breeze. I felt useless and angry towards myself, and my only escape was to paint. I would drop my overweight backpack at my door, rush up the stairs, and switch my computer on to watch Bob Ross' "Beginners Floral Painting Workshop." My eyes were glued to the screen as I attempted to follow his gracious and effortless strokes that danced on his canvas. My canvas never looked as good as his, but whenever I used the dollar store paintbrush my mom bought me, my passion bloomed.

It was beautiful. After several years of practice, I painted something I was genuinely proud of. I couldn't stop staring at it. It had flowers that were so pale yet filled with color blooming throughout, along with leaves of so many different shades of emerald green. My painting had detailed texture and delicate shading that brought each petal to life. The garden was out of this world, something you'd only see in a fragment of one's imagination. I slept soundly that day, knowing that the painting would be there tomorrow, as pride and happiness overflowed my heart.

The morning glee I felt vanished, and an uncontrollable anger surged through me when I saw flakes of paint fall off the one piece of art I loved. The painting didn't dry properly. Its intricate petals were drained of color and cracked like the leather on an old sofa. Instead of the vibrant pastels I mixed, it was lifeless. The beautiful tulips, carnations, and gardenias were dead. And without a second thought, I destroyed the once beautiful canvas with a scissor in my hand.

Where did this anger come from? Why was I so destructive towards my work even after all the time and effort? I asked myself those questions while grasping the scissor that pierced through the canvas in one unpredictable jab. Water flooded the bottom of my eyelids, and tears trickled down my face. But no matter how much I cried, I couldn't understand. My heart sank deeper, and my anger reached a boiling point after I realized I couldn't undo the damage. I began to cut each flower, leaf, and every part of my canvas until only shredded pieces remained. No one would know the painting existed or that it was once a garden of my dreams.

Fearful that an outburst would happen again, I stopped. Dust formed above the container covered in paint, and the brushes hardened over time. Would I ever be free of the shackles of fear that restrained me? I patiently waited for the moment where painting didn't remind me of sorrow. I didn't think I'd ever come to terms with what happened and learn to trust myself again. Yet here I was, holding a brush dipped in ultramarine blue and attempting to paint those flowers, falling in love again.



"The Waves"
Jasmine Hurtado

Roots

by Milene Escoto

I remember the days in which my father
explained to four year old me the birth and death of cherry blossoms
I stood on the trees' massive roots as he photographed me with his bulky camera
the white strands amid his charcoal hair, scattered there since he was eighteen,
flowed past his soft, buoyant eyes,
ended onto his shoulders I would sail on;
before the arms that warmed me effortlessly

Everyday the white flashes brighter within my hair's roots
my father's hair remains long, smoked by age, his eyes wilted
the camera in the closet grows more pollinated by dust
the cherry blossom trees die unseen by me for yet another year

Today, I write these lines surrounded by maple trees
I wonder about the willow tree two blocks from my house;
if its sturdy, wizened bark and wiry branches could engulf me.

Halimaw

by Nilo-Enrico Neri

Creatures Of the Night
You can hear them scurrying in the streets
Howling at the moon
Hissing at ongoing passerby's,
Subduing themselves in the moons glow.
They watch, and wait, and listen for the unfortunate.
The ghosts, goblins and ghouls
Moan, groan, about never going home.
Nails file themselves on bone,
Tongues stretch through the cracks and what's shone
Is naught but the wet stain of the taken.
They live and surround us and none other scare me more
Then the one I know that sits, a bore.
They come in all shapes and sizes
And I hate how two faced
they can be with their disguises.
They lure with promise of a good room
Only to surely note that it's your doom
A sacrifice be made, for the penance I call home
To the two-faced snake that lives at the top
To the monster I wish would just drop
To the worst creature I know I just want to say,
"I'm sorry landlord I cannot pay"
Fuck off.

My Life Is.

by Rohan McMillan

My life is like the morning sun casting a golden glow over the ocean
like a field of monarch butterflies swarming flowers
But my life is also like the evening rain flooding streets as we sleep
like the grey of snow against the black sky

My life is like pages against fingers as they turn the page of a book
like chess pieces being exchanged on a board
But my life is also like water hitting my skin at the bottom of the shower
like wind buffeting my clothes as I walk against it

My life is like elderberry tea in the morning to soothe my mind and body
like cheap honey buns from college vending machines
But my life is also like the iron of blood against my tongue
like chlorine filling my mouth and lungs

My life is like a fresh forest bed of moss and fungi
like alfalfa pellets for the horses
But my life is also like gasoline and chemicals leaking into the air
like the abrupt tang of Guanfacine

My life is like leaves scuttling across the concrete
like clocks ticking in time with the world
But my life is also like family shouting back and forth
like anxious pencils tapping on desks

My life is like Where The Wild Things Are childhood and imagination free
like The Raven Cycle life and magic intertwined
But my life is also like Life is Strange regret and mistakes made
like an M83 song drowning out the rest of the world

My life is.

Midnights are for Heartache

by Alexa Colontino

Midnights are for Heartache.

Cause when the clock strikes 12,

my eyes start to well and my heart starts to reminisce of your lips,

and the feeling of your kiss and those sharp golden eyes locked on mine

But there's nothing inside.

Midnights are for Heartache.

But hearts are meant to hold

Not to break, but that was my mistake.

I forgot to label "Handle with care."

But you forgot to label "Please Beware."

Then the clock strikes 12 and again,

Here I find myself

Caught up in a devastating thrill.

Midnights are for Heartache.



"Molly"

Paula Hidalgo

The Homestead – A Villanelle

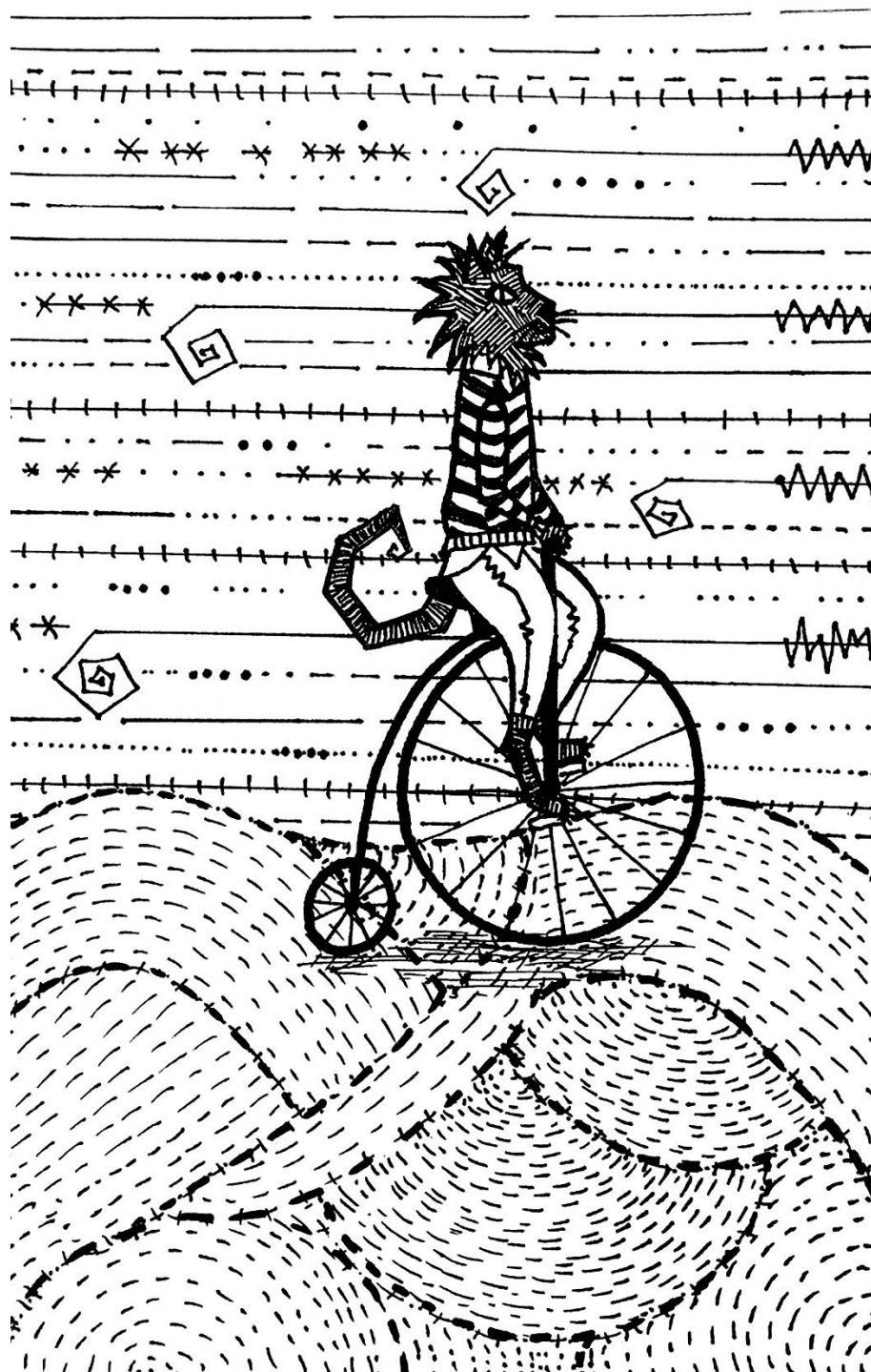
by Bonnie I. Burns

1880 a long dirt road, church steeple on the hill
 Few houses, mostly farmland, a town begins to build.
 One house, built with love so strong, our hearts remain there still.
 A wide porch wraps around, welcomes guests to fill,
 A hearth warms and captures stories, of elders who have tilled.
 1880 a long dirt road, church steeple on the hill
 Its creaking bones hold all the weight, children growing still.
 Ancestors join in spirit those to whom the house was willed.
 One house, built with love so strong, our hearts remain there still.
 Winding staircase to bedrooms high, night dreams and wishes fill
 creak with memories, great-grandparents, whispers softly chilled.
 1880 a long dirt road, church steeple on the hill
 Family photos as the steps ascend, remind us to fulfill
 their wishes to keep the homestead safe, as we swore we will.
 One house, built with love so strong, our hearts remain there still.
 With hope and prayers, we close our eyes against cold winter's sill
 that all who live within these walls remain together till...
 1880 a long dirt road, church steeple on the hill
 One house, built with love so strong, our hearts remain there still.



“Asian Elephant at the Yala National Park in Sri Lanka”

Gallage Bryan Sameera De Silva



"Joyride"

Paula Hidalgo

By Candlelight

by Joseph Liberti

Sunset in an abandoned greenhouse. There are broken pots and overgrown vines everywhere. An old work table sits center stage. Shadows are being cast through the broken panes of glass. ASH, a curious teenager and HEATHER, his frantic girlfriend, are scouring the ruins for something.

ASH: Did you find it?

HEATHER: Just some old magazines and another broken pot.

ASH: Damn.

HEATHER: What happened?

ASH: Nothing.

HEATHER: Oh. (Beat) Hey Ash?

ASH: What's up?

HEATHER: Do you ever think this is wrong?

ASH: Don't think about it.

HEATHER: Ok. (Beat) Hey Ash? (No response) Ash?

ASH: What, babe?

HEATHER: I'm sorry.

ASH: (Going over to her) It's ok, Heather. Let's just find what I came here for and leave, ok?

We can drive down to Applebees' after? Doesn't that sound good?

HEATHER: I guess so.

ASH: Great. Let's keep looking. I'm going to go check in the back room. (Exits)

HEATHER: (Off-stage) Ash, wait! (To herself) Oh god. Okay. No big deal. The faster we find it, the faster we can leave. Just think- half apps. Half apps. Okay. (Crawling and searching the ground) It has to be here somewhere. A little brown box. A little. Brown. Box. No big deal. I've only ever seen a million of them! It's nothing new. (Looking back) God, I hope he finds it before me. Who would even hide a package in here? Just leave it on the table for God's sake! It's not like this place is a hub for traffic, where someone would pick it up and- (Rising, hits her head on the table) OW! (Terracotta pot from the worktable rolls off and shatters) Shit! Shit!

ASH: (Off-stage) Heather? Did you find it?! (Comes rushing in) Oh. (Pause) Here, let me help you.

HEATHER: Isn't this romantic.

ASH: Huh?

HEATHER: Did you find anything?

ASH: Nothing. I'm starting to think he didn't leave it.

HEATHER: Are you joking? We came all this way and it could not even be here?

ASH: I'm not sure, I just haven't seen it yet. That's all.

HEATHER: I'm starting to get over this.

ASH: (Holding her) No babe, you can't give up yet! We need this.

HEATHER: [Half-jokingly] No Ash. Whatever this is, you need it. Not me.

ASH: C'mon Heather. It's for us. Think about it. (Caressing her) We could have anything you've ever wanted. Long walks on the beach in Malibu, or, or, we could visit your family in New York. I know you miss them. We could be together all the time! No more half apps at Applebees'. (HEATHER laughs; ASH picks her up and put her on the table) We can eat at country clubs and drink prosecco every night.

HEATHER: You don't even like prosecco.

ASH: I'll like it for you, Heath. We can have whatever you'd like. I'll be here for you because I love you, Heather.

HEATHER: Oh, gee, Ash. I love you too. (Beat) And I think I'd like that.

ASH: I knew you'd come around. God, you look so beautiful.

HEATHER: Oh! You're just saying that!

ASH: No babe, I mean it. You're radiating. (Kisses her)

HEATHER: Oh, Ash!

ASH: Oh, Heather!

ASH lays her down on the table. As she falls, another pot rolls off the table and breaks. Inside the pot, there was a small box wrapped in brown craft paper.

HEATHER: Oh!

ASH: (Removed) Heather! You did it!

HEATHER: Ash! We found it! (They embrace)

ASH: This is great! Just leave it on the table. Don't open it. I'm going to go start the car. I'll be right back. (Begins to exit) [Jokingly] Next stop: New York! (Exits)

HEATHER: Okay! I'll wait here.

HEATHER (Notices the broken pot and begins picking up the fragments. She picks up the box and places it on the table. She looks towards offstage. Then, fiddling with the box.)

What could it be? (Looks off) God. (Shakes it feverishly) Well, if I just take a peek. (Begins to unwrap the box) Oh, but Ash would kill me. Oh, come on Heather! It couldn't be that bad. (Unwraps the box and opens it) OH!!! (Car engine noises start) FUCK! Oh, oh okay. Okay.

Uhm. (begins to try and re-wrap the box)

ASH: (Off-stage) You ready Heather?

HEATHER: Hahaha! Just a second!

ASH: (Entering) I started the-
(Beat)

ASH: Heather did you see it?

HEATHER: Ash? (Pause) Ash what the hell?

ASH: Heather. (Advances towards her)

HEATHER: Ash what are you doing?

ASH: Heather it was supposed to be a surprise.

HEATHER: Ash what are you doing? (Beat) ASH??!!

They begin to circle around the table, with the box between them. ASH eventually catches HEATHER and holds her.

HEATHER: ASH!!!!

ASH: Heather. Heather. Just breathe. Okay. Breathe.

HEATHER: What is going on?? Let me go!

ASH: It's okay. Listen. Listen to me. Heather. Look at me. Heather, look at me! (Pause)

HEATHER: ASHTON!

ASH: Heather, listen. I'm sorry but this was the only way.

HEATHER: What do you MEAN??

ASH: You've been so busy with everything, that I never found the right time to tell you-

HEATHER: To tell me your psychotic?!?

ASH: What??

HEATHER: Let me go, Ash. (ASH releases her; HEATHER crosses to the other side of the table)

ASH: Heather, you're scaring me. What happened?

HEATHER: I should be asking you!

ASH: Well, I've been wanting to ask you for a while now, but I could never find the right time. I didn't have the money for a ring or anything so-

HEATHER: Ash... Are you seriously proposing to me right now???

ASH: Well, it was supposed to be a surprise.

HEATHER: Yeah. Well, it worked. I'm surprised. Alright. I'm surprised.

ASH: I thought you would have sensed it...

HEATHER: How would I have known you would get me a dead woman's ring??>

ASH: ...what are you talking about?

HEATHER: I didn't think we were grave robbers now, Ash!

ASH: Heather, what are you talking about?? I wanted to get you a ring. A real ring. So I could propose to you. Charlie said he could take care of it for me, and he'd leave it here.

HEATHER: Charlie? You trusted Charlie to help you? Oh my god. Oh my god!

ASH: Heather, what's going on?

HEATHER: (Reopening the box) Its rubber! Oh, thank god!!

ASH: He gave me a rubber ring??

HEATHER: He gave you a rubber finger! (Pulls a severed finger with a ring on it from the box)

ASH: Oh my GOD!!

HEATHER: You see! (Squishes the finger) Rubber! (Beat) The ring is quite nice though.

ASH: You have to give Charlie credit. He sure got us a nice ring.

HEATHER: Soooooo...

ASH: Oh right!

ASH attempts to pull the ring from the finger, but to no avail. Giving in, he proposes with the finger itself.

ASH: Heather, will you-

HEATHER: YES! (They embrace) Now let's get out of here. I've had enough surprises for one day.

ASH: Half-apps?

HEATHER: You read my mind.

ASH and HEATHER exit. Car sounds of pulling away. Lights Out.



"An Immortal Wreck"

by Monica Bond

Rearranging Furniture

by Nia Coleman

Jasper glares at the cozy little bookshop and scowls. He cannot stand walking into bookstores. Jasper can't walk near the best-selling section and not completely get rid of the bitterness in his heart. If only less vain, he wouldn't be the way he is now. He wouldn't be so angry. What Jasper truly wants is one of his books on that damn shelf. He bumps into a man. Cleared from his thoughts, he turns to apologize but the man glowers at him, brushing past in a blur. Startled, Jasper looks down at his watch walking past the display window with a new energy.

It was 8, and he was running a little ahead of time, so he could stop off at the cafe for a bit of breakfast. He walks into the warm air of the cafe and sits at a table and pulls out his journal. He gets a few lines down onto the cream-colored pages when a young waitress comes to take his order.

"Hey Jas," she smiles "morning."

"Hey, Mira! How's it going?"

"I'm supposed to ask you that!" she rolls her amber eyes playfully "Yeah, I'm fine. Just off to a rough start today."

Jasper's eyes flicker to Mira's face and take in the slight dark circles under her eyes, and her curly hair, usually up in a perky ponytail, now hangs down and covers her ears. What's up with her? Jasper cleared his head and forced himself to smile a little wider.

"Rough night?" He says, trying to joke.

"Something like that," she laughs. "I was up all night cleaning my apartment and rearranged furniture. It looks awesome now, but I woke up with all these aches." Mira stretches her arm, waving Jasper off with a casual hand. She clears her throat.

"Anyway, can I get you the usual? Or something else?"

Jasper didn't realize he was staring, until he pulled himself out of it nodding "Um, yeah. I'll have the usual."

In a few minutes, she brought black coffee and a bit to go for lunch. She sets it down in front of Jasper who takes it gratefully

.

Jasper swallows a little before asking "Hey Mira?"

"Yeah?"

Lowering his voice Jasper leans in "Are you sure you're okay? If you want, we can go grab a drink, and talk about it."

Leaning in, she responds, "I don't know what you're talking about." Her Amber eyes

met his gray ones and said “Mr. Gray, you’re adorable. But you do know I have a boyfriend...right?”

He did not. A boyfriend was the magic word. He leaned away and nodded covering up his embarrassment with a sip of coffee

“O-of course. Yeah, I was just wondering this was like... what, the 4th time this week you've been “arranging” furniture.”

Jasper was on autopilot. The day flew by and he was out, already on his way home. He takes the bus, walking that last few blocks until he makes it into his flat. His hands fumble for his key and jingled the tricky knob to the right and then the left to open it. Jasper shuffles into his apartment and closes the door. Slumping onto his couch, he lets out a deep sigh.

Boyfriend. She has a boyfriend. The word has been haunting him all day. Jasper shakes out of it and walks over to his makeshift office with a view of the apartment building across from his. Sitting down at the desk he opens up his laptop and his latest scribbles in his journal tinkering around, hoping to write a brand-new rabbit hole that he could fall down for hours. He knows he can do it. He knows he can write. It's only a matter of finding a story to tell.

It was a quarter after 8 when Jasper closed his laptop shut. Rubbing his eyes, he got up to get something to eat walking into the kitchen and reheated the thing he had last night. Pretty soon he looked over at his cabinet. The alcohol beckoned. To stop the pounding in his head, he gave in to that little voice and took the bottle. He took a long swig, and the amber-colored liquid went down burning.

He stayed that way swigging every now and again, loosening his tie and rolling up the sleeves. He staggered back to his desk and opened up his laptop once more. He started typing again, but the only word that came out was a boyfriend. Something snagged his eye from his computer. The bright light is flickering on in the window across from him.

A young woman entered Jasper’s view with curly hair all down covering her face. She still had her little black apron on from her shift. Mira was busy on the phone. She paced back and forth in the room, moving her hands with what she was saying.

God, she’s beautiful, Jasper thought. Mira, oblivious to his stare, takes off her apron and walks into the next room.

She comes back into view with nothing on but an oversized T-shirt and her hair up in a messy bun. She sits on her couch watching her TV. A pang stings Jasper’s chest, the yearning kind. Wishing he could be there with her, all cuddled up with her in his T-shirt. She looked sweet, so soft and kissable and-

Mira's head snapped up, and she jumped up and went out of his vision for something. When she comes back into view, she tows a tall man with her, and he scoops her in a hug as they kiss passionately. That must be the boyfriend, Jasper frowns.

He knows he shouldn't watch this, but he can't help it. Jasper couldn't get enough of her. But he certainly had enough of that idiot she's with.

After a long time, they sit on the couch and cuddle-the same way he just wished with Mira. Jealousy's green thorns prickled his heart and made him seethe. He left his office and stumbled to the bathroom.

You shot your shot, and she turned you down. There's no reason to be mad. Jasper looked up at his dripping face, spotting the hurt and anger in his wild eyes. Plus she would never want to be with someone like you. He kept replaying the words of their last conversation. How needy he sounded. Jasper cringed at the thought.

He shook his head to clear all the emotions, and it didn't work too well. Jasper walks out of his bathroom and back into his office and to his laptop. He made an effort not to look at the window, at the happiness that he could never have.

He gets something down on the screen at least. He starts to type more and more, and soon he had two pages. He'll reread them in the morning because he knows that they looked crazy now. But at least it was progress. Jasper smiles to himself. His eyes flicker up for a moment, and that's when he saw it.

Mira's pinned to a wall. The boyfriend's hand kept her there by her neck. Her arms flail around grabbing at his arms. Tears are running down her blotchy face, and he keeps slapping at her face with quick little swipes. The boyfriend looks furious. He let go of her, and she wobbled, catching her balance on a chair. Her mouth is moving so in a muted plea. He shoves her. She slips, losing her grip on the chair. She collapses onto the floor.

The boyfriend looks around the apartment, and his eyes land on the window. For a moment Jasper could swear that they locked eyes. And it surprises Jasper when he realizes that he knew those eyes. It's you.

The man walks to the window and abruptly closes the curtains. Jasper got to his feet with a different rage. He went to his room and got on his knees and felt around under his bed until his hands grasped the package he was looking for.

He went back to his office and unwrapped it. He wraps his fingers around the pistol, feeling the familiar weight in his palm. Cocking it and aiming at the man illuminated in the curtained window across the way. Jasper imagines pulling the trigger, having the idiot fall in a heap with a pool of scarlet underneath him.

The thought of it makes him smile.



“Colors at Bergen Community College”

Gallage Bryan Sameera De Silva

Losing Your Way

by Bonnie I. Burns

The morning light came streaming in much too bright, Ann thought to herself a bit annoyed. Rolling over she reached for the alarm clock to hit the snooze and buried her face back into the warm pillow. “Do I really have to get up yet?” she asked aloud, although there was no one else there. She was finding it hard getting used to waking up to an empty apartment. But her daughter, Cindy, was on her own now and she would just have to get used to living alone.

There had been too many changes lately. Cindy moved into Manhattan so she could pursue her dance career. Ann sold the house she had raised her in by herself after the divorce since she was nine. She moved into this almost too sunny downstairs apartment in a much smaller house in a nearby town. At least her landlady was nice. She was quiet and mostly kept to herself in the upstairs apartment of the house. Being on the ground floor gave Ann access to the yard and garden, which she figured was a bonus even though she did not care much for gardening. But the biggest change of all was retiring from her public relations job after more than thirty years. Adjusting to that was even harder than missing her daughter. What was she going to do with all this free time?

Ann didn’t really have any hobbies. She spent most of her time working all these years. Or being involved with Cindy’s school activities, shuttling her to dance classes and gymnastics, and attending her recitals or volunteering for occasional duties as a class mother at school events.

But that was all behind her. Now it was just her and the coffeepot at 8:00am. What on earth was she going to do today? Every day. She could reorganize the linen closet again. Or tidy up the pantry. But how many times could she re-alphabetize the soup cans? Order. Routine. Her job had provided structure, meaning and purpose to her days for most of her adult life. That order managed to keep the anxiety at bay. But now?

Random thoughts flood in multiple conflicting directions into her mind. “I need to find a hobby,” she said out loud again, although of course no one was there to hear. She dreaded the thought of “hobbies.” She could not bear the idea of growing old, crocheting in a rocking chair waiting for Cindy to call. “Okay, that’s it. I need to find something to do with myself,” she scolded as she quickly dressed and grabbed her keys. “Barnes and Noble must have a whole section on hobbies. Something will catch my interest, I hope.” She concluded the one-way conversation with strong intention and headed out, letting the door slam behind her.

“Joshua, is that you?” Ann asks as she steps out of her car in the late November chill on the upper-level parking lot of the mall.

“Ann?” the familiar but aged face responds.

Walking over to the man, Ann recognizes her old hometown friend although she has not seen him in almost two decades.

“What a surprise running into you,” she calls as she approaches him. “I am heading into Barnes and Noble. Join me. I’ll buy you a cup of coffee.”

Pulling his sweater around his neck she notices his threadbare gloves and long unkempt grey beard. Welcoming the warmth, they step into the vestibule of the bookstore. Ann, feeling relieved by the blasts of heat pouring from the ceiling grates, was comforted by the sight of rows and rows of books all neatly arranged and categorized by subject. Order. That was what she loved best in life, besides Cindy of course, and the endless stacks of books and an old childhood friend walking at her side gave her a reassuring warmth that went beyond the comforting heat. The anxiety she had felt as she was driving to the mall was already beginning to ease just by the orderly sight that greeted her. Her dark brown eyes scan the store for the café inside.

But something was out of order. Something about Joshua did not seem right. His disheveled appearance and ragged silver Einstein hair that exploded out from under a tight black wool cap were all just a bit too askew. Those wild strands looked even more out of place when paired with the bushy wires of his long white eyebrows standing at attention above his dark gleaming eyes. Once settled at the café, steaming cups of coffee warming their hands, she began the usual line of inquiry. What do you talk about when you have not seen someone in over twenty years?

“So, how have you been,” she asked as if they were meeting for their weekly chat.

“Well, I’m homeless,” he answered.

“WHAT !!? How on earth did that happen!?” not even attempting to hide her surprise.

“The house where I was living was renting out rooms illegally. The cops found out and the three guys who were living there, including me, all got thrown out. The landlord could end up in jail, so I guess I am better off than he is,” he explained, ending with a laugh.

“How long has it been?” Ann asked.

“Almost two years. I lived in my car last winter. But then it broke down and got towed away from the trucker’s lot where I used to park. It’s somewhere at a tow lot right now and I can’t afford to get it back. It doesn’t run anyway, so I might as well just junk it,” he casually replied, this time with a twinkle in his eye.

A barrage of questions flooded into her mind as she tried to comprehend what he just told her. Joshua did not seem the least bit upset as he explained his situation. How can he be so calm about all this, Ann asked herself, and how could this have happened to him? Joshua had always been a bit peculiar, even from a young age. She first noticed it in fourth grade when he stood up in the middle of science class and explained atomic theory in several very clear straightforward paragraphs. Most of their classmates shunned him after that. But Ann thought he was brilliant and the most interesting kid in the class, so they became good friends. As he grew up he became more and more of a loner and found his friends among the philosophers. He was more comfortable with Plato and Socrates than he ever was with their classmates. He always seemed to have one foot in this world and one foot, well, somewhere else.... But now, homeless?

“How are you handling the situation? How do you cope?” she tried to calmly ask, her thoughts spinning. “Where do you stay?”

“I live here in the mall. The folks in this bookstore are great. They let me sit and read most days. The chairs out in the mall are a bit uncomfortable for sleeping. But there is a food court, so getting food is never a problem. A few of the fast-food joints even let me run a bill until my monthly social security check comes in,” he ended with a laugh.

“But where do you go at night when the mall closes?” she continued.

“I leave the mall right before closing time and just wander around outside. Then after the security team finishes their check and lock-up I sneak back in through one of the doors they leave open for the cleaning crew that comes in at night. Most of the cleaning folks know me and they even let me hide in one of the cleaning supply rooms if there is still a stray guard hanging around. I guess I am really lucky they help me out. Good karma, I guess,” he laughed again.

There was no tone of complaint in his voice. Joshua seemed almost content with the situation, self-satisfied even. Proud of his resourcefulness Ann considered in disbelief. He has an endless supply of books and food and a modicum of shelter, for whatever it is worth. Perhaps he is actually living in samadhi, she mused. Maybe he has finally found the union with the divine he was always seeking since their teenage years. Maybe he is doing just fine, Ann dared to suggest to herself. Would that thought help her fall asleep when she curls up in her comfortable warm bed tonight? She hoped it might.

Seemingly trying to change the subject, Joshua asked:

“What have you been reading lately?” as if they were at a book club and had seen each other just last week.

“I really don’t read much at all anymore,” she replied, feeling a bit ashamed.

"I am surprised. You were always such a good student in school. And with all the books I gave you over the years I thought you would be a scholar by now," he replied.

"Well, life took a few unexpected turns. I married young and when the marriage fell apart I ended up having to raise my daughter on my own. So I spent the next thirty years chained to a computer under fluorescent lights in a 9-5 public relations job," she shared. "It helped me keep my sanity and I did it all for my girl. It was worth it, of course, but a lot of dreams had to go by the wayside," she wistfully replied, trying to justify having abandoned her spiritual search in order to earn a living and handle her responsibilities.

"You were passionate about the quest for enlightenment. I thought for sure you would reach samadhi before I did," he laughed.

"Not all of us can live on meditation alone," she mumbled, more to herself than to him. "I had to keep a roof over our heads and keep us both fed."

"Do you still meditate?" he continued prodding her.

"A little, just before I fall asleep. But not much," she sheepishly replied.

"Why don't you meditate more? You said you are retired now. You have all the time in the world," he pushed.

"I know. I should, but that part of my life seems so far away now. I don't know how I would even get back into it. I am exhausted from just having to earn a living and survive all these years," she wearily replied.

"Wait right here. There is a book I want you to read," he sputtered out excitedly as he quickly rose up and dashed off, disappearing into the store's rows of books.

Left by herself at the table, grateful for a moment of silence to let everything she had learned about Joshua's situation sink in, she drifted into memories of their childhood. Ann remembered the many summer afternoons in their early teens they spent together sitting on the porch of her family home. Rain or shine, he always arrived with 3-4 books tucked under his arm and usually a cassette or two of YES music he wanted her to listen to. Then he would begin his discourse, educating Ann about eastern mysticism, reincarnation and the yogic masters, exposing her to the Bhagavad-gita, The Tibetan Book of the Dead, Siddhartha, and so many other wonderful philosophic and spiritual texts. Joshua could talk endlessly for hours and Ann would muse to herself that she was in the School of Athens with her own personal Plato or Aristotle sitting across from her in his wicker chair. He was like her own personal guru, exposing her to wondrous concepts that exploded her Catholic upbringing and young belief system into a zillion shattered pieces, leaving her free and boundless as the cosmic universe. Ann's father, a strict Irish Catholic, hated when Joshua came round but he never forbade it. He must have regretted that the summer Ann turned

sixteen and started refusing to go to church with him on Sundays. Instead, she would sit cross-legged on the picnic table in the backyard chanting OM as her father crossed the street to go to mass, the church bells adding a nice chorus to her vocal chant.

Joshua returned wearing a big grin and dropped a beautiful looking book onto the table.

"I'm going to buy this for you, but only if you promise to read it," he said impishly. Samadhi Unity of Consciousness and Existence. The glossy black cover was emblazoned with the colorful silhouette of a yogi radiating all the energetic colors of the astral body. The seven chakras glowed, inviting the reader to open its pages and immerse themselves in the world of the spiritual self. Ann pulled herself back to the present, not having heard what he said.

"How can you be so content with your situation?" she interrogated him.

"I don't really mind. I don't need a lot of material comforts like most people," he answered bluntly.

"Having a place to live is not a lot of material comfort, Joshua. It is a basic necessity like food and water," she insisted. "You told me you have income. You get a pension from all the years you worked at Fedex and you get your social security check. There really is no reason for you to be homeless."

"Maybe, maybe not. Have you ever tried living on the street? You might discover some new perspectives about yourself and what everyone calls reality," he teased, grinning.

"Why on earth would I want to!" she almost shouted, quickly rejecting his absurd suggestion. Then she covered her mouth with a giggle, hoping they would not get themselves thrown out of the bookstore.

"Is there anything I can do for you? I would like to try to help if I can," she sincerely offered.

"Maybe you could drive me to the storage unit where I have all my stuff. I have a warm coat there," he said.

"Of course, I'd be glad to. Maybe on the way we can stop at a barber and get you a shave and a haircut, my treat. What do you say?"

"Sure, okay," he answered with a relaxed smile and a glint in his eye.

After dropping Joshua back at the mall after their errands she returned home to her small apartment in the house with the garden and lush backyard. But this time when she put the key in the lock and stepped into the silence, she did not mind being alone as she

often had in the last few weeks. Taking off her coat, grateful that the November chill remained on the other side of the door she glanced around the living room still holding her car keys dangling from her hand. The reading nook in the bay window looked more inviting than usual and the pillows arranged on the sofa were right where she placed them. Everything was exactly in order as she had left it. But more importantly, it was warm. It was silent. And yes, it was empty and she was alone. But it was home. She had not felt that sense of gratitude in a very long time. But having spent the afternoon with Joshua and learning of his homelessness gave her a whole new perspective on things. Circumstances can change in the blink of an eye and one can never take their comforts and security for granted.

Later, tossing and turning in her bed, Ann could not sleep. She could not stop thinking of Joshua and his situation. She kept recounting their conversation and the complicated emotions it evoked in her. She thought about the choices she had made in her life, the dreams of graduate school and career goals she had given up in order to provide a good home and a stable lifestyle for her daughter till she was grown enough to set out on her own. Sure, when she was younger she would have preferred to be able to remain a free spirit. But her choices brought responsibilities

with them and on reflection she would not change any of the choices she made. As she told Joshua, she did it all for Cindy and it was all worth it. But always being “responsible” was hard, too, in spite of its rewards.

Maybe in his own way Joshua was better off. Living day to day, grounded in his spirituality and not worrying about where his next meal was coming from, trusting that the Universe would provide. He did seem at peace with himself. Wearily, exhausted from her inability to sleep and the tsunami of anxious thoughts, she rolled over and switched on the bedside lamp and reached for the book Joshua had given her. She noticed, as if seeing the book for the first time, how beautiful the cover really was....

As the week passed, Ann could not stop thinking about Joshua. She increasingly reached for the book on her nightstand, immersing herself each night in longer durations of reading and remembering how much she used to love esoteric writings. Night after night it seemed like a thick fog was lifting and she was sleeping more peacefully and looking forward to the mornings in a way she had not in a long time. Wanting to help Joshua, even if he was not interested in helping himself, each afternoon she spent several hours on the internet searching for resources that might be helpful for him. She almost leapt out of her chair when she found an ashram in the nearby mountains less than an hour away! Excitedly, Ann found herself driving back to Barnes and Noble eagerly hoping to find Joshua there so she could share her news.

As if sitting in his own sumptuous library, she found him sitting in a large comfortable chair in the corner of the bookstore with a large oversized heavy book spread open across

his lap. Images of Greek gods and goddesses danced across the page in vivid colors. Before even sitting down beside him, Ann blurted out her good news.

"I found an ashram very close by in the Catskill mountains. They have a residency program! Maybe you could spend the winter there," she almost shrieked with excitement. "I'm free this weekend. I could drive you there and we could check it out."

"Sounds promising," Joshua replied with a broad smile which she could actually see, since he had gotten the shave. "Maybe you can spend the weekend there, too. And if they let me stay, maybe you can come visit me sometimes. I bet they would let you sit in on the meditation sessions," his eyes were shining as his grin widened.

"I'll see what I can arrange," her smile matching his, reflected the renewed light in her eyes. "Oh, I almost forgot. I finished the wonderful book you gave me. Thank you! I want to pick up another one," she told him excitedly. But instead of heading down the Hobbies aisle, she headed straight for the Philosophy and Spirituality section to make her modest purchase.

That night, curled up in bed with her new little book in hand, Ann looked at the cover a long time. Autobiography of a Yogi. The beautiful face of Paramahansa Yogananda almost smiled back at her, deep compassion welling in his dark eyes. It was the first spiritual book Joshua had ever given her all those long years ago that started her on a spiritual path. Where better to begin again than to return to the beginning and reconnect with the Master who so inspired her?

A deep warmth settled into her chest as she opened to the first page. She visualized her heart center glowing and expanding as she started to read. Her usual rampant never-ending thoughts slowed and a calm stillness began to settle over her, embracing her and filling her inner and outer space. The words felt so familiar, like an old friend returning to visit. She smiled inwardly, knowing she could begin to trust her feelings again and all would work out exactly as it should. After reading only the first few pages her eyes became heavy and she began to drift off to sleep, contentedly musing at how her unusual encounter with Joshua had led her here again.



“Windowfront”

Paula Hidalgo

Dreaming about Daddy

by Liliana Hopkins

lambs sit cross legged and solemn in their pews
a little girl hides in the pulpit from Matthew's
22:37 waiting for the Daddy of her reveries
 but Daddy is crying in the living room
on Laurel Avenue

Daddy's gun was in the cookie tin
on top of the fridge
frosty waving on the lid
dusted with memorial lint
curves like an eclipse
fading like a dream
under the glare of my mind

he whispers If I should die before I wake
 but God doesn't know these waters

The Point

by Paula Hidalgo

With so many fish out there in the sea
You just keep on coming after me
Again and again, in sight, there's no end
I don't want it to, and sadly that's true

I must ask "what is the point of all this?"
That look in your eyes, yet not even a kiss
Is this the end or, has it even begun?
I look in your eyes and my heart is stunned

I don't know what I want anymore
Just to search and find you in my lore
Always knew I was mute, didn't know I was blind
Those sweet things you say always clutter my mind

I must ask "what is the point of all this?"
That look in your eyes, yet not even a kiss
Is this our end or have we even begun?
I look in your eyes and my heart is stunned

I fell head first, over my heels
Can you even see me when I'm still down here?
I know you too well, you don't know me at all
Don't think you care to
In love, I still fall

I must ask "what is the point of all this?"
That night on the 5th is a night that I miss
Are we only a myth?
Not even a kiss
Just answer me this
What's the point of all this?

Play

By Christopher Martinez

Life is a play
We are the only ones watching.
Life is a play
There is no audience.
Life is a play
There is no performance.
Life is a play and only we—
Myself and I
Know the story.

I do not know your story
I do not know your play
Only mine.
That is okay
That is fine
But this is not the only theatre.
Remember that.
Life is a play
Life is play.



"Te Para Tres"

Paula Hidalgo

Abuela's Hands

by Yahdani Mejia

Abuela's hands
Adorned with gold jewelry
Long beige nails
Almond shaped like the snacks she toted
Rummaging through her purse for something to offer
Wanting to give to others at all times

A thick gold ring on her right hand that has been on her finger my entire life
Even through her hospital stay a few months ago
Even through her time in the ICU
All the way back to when she was grasping my tiny toddler hands
As I admired the lines of her light brown manos

Now I sit by her side at the nursing home, holding those same hands
While she still remembers me now and those times long ago
Y siempre me quedaré a su lado, even after those hands no longer recognize mine

Wordly Desires

by Nilo-Enrico Neri

Why do words fail when I think about you?
 Is it not cruel enough, to experience a world without
 Being by my side?
 I have videos I could decide to transcribe
 But words will fail when
 You turn to face the camera
 For the thousandth time.
 The words fail like branches
 Holding leaves in a hurricane
 Language crashes into diction,
 While simile, like a body hitting pavement,
 Hits metaphor.
 Onomatopoeia WHOOSH and SPLATS
 Into the languid personification.
 Until finally, connotation collides with summary
 And once again I'm left the phrase
 "Memento Mori"
 The solace in grief that
 One day I will join you
 The thousandth turn to the camera
 With another staring at my lively face
 Happy to laugh another day
 Not knowing how far away until
 the screen turns black.
 How can mere words
 Describe my grief in more meaningful ways
 When all I want to do is get on that stage
 And fall, crack my knees on the pavement
 Sink into the floor and pulverize my arms, slam them into ground
 Bleed profusely, as it fails to understand my grief
 And my arms pound over and over as I scream words
 That have no particular meaning to anyone
 except me
 As this ball of ugly, disgusting husk of human
 Grievously wounded
 Who throws their forearms only attached by
 Bone and tendon back into the air
 And without words
 Desperately continues to fight the Earth
 For something to come out of this pain

For something to come out of the void left
 In place of you.
 But instead, I sit
 Dreading the words
 "We're gathered here today"
 That hue of blue, taunting
 Me to throw my hardest punch
 To know words when
 No words
 can come to mind.
 I will not write of your generosity
 Ferocity, adversity, creativity, amiability,
 I will not write of the times of
 Laughter, smiles, greetings, games
 And especially not of our many talks
 That extended far into the night
 Of road trips and goings on
 Of countries we'd visit after we were done
 Words will fail to be enough
 To describe how you looked in that sweater
 Made last year, and how you laughed at
 The cat on it that said "Santa Claws"
 Your arms when the bee flew into your car window as you
 Waited for me to get into my house
 Your face when finishing the last chapter in our favorite book
 And we cried together at its end
 Would words be enough to encapsulate you?
 The you in my memory, in the cameras
 How could I possibly begin
 To make a, you
 On the page
 When you can't possibly
 Be written with what words have to offer

Game of Ghouls

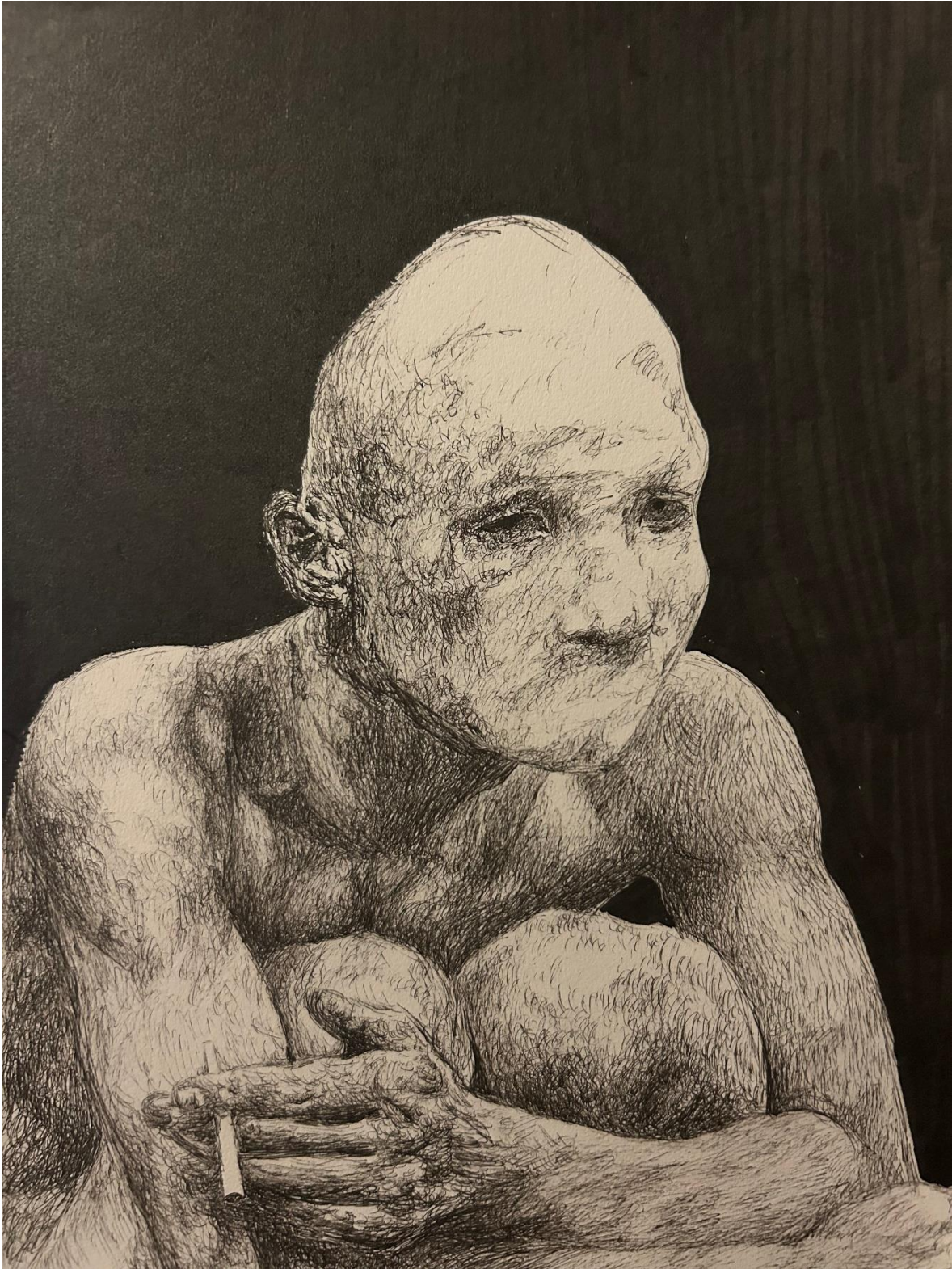
by Milene Escoto

I am constantly twisting about in the middle of a chessboard:
my existence is spliced between endless black and white squares throughout a mere day
and as the light reflects off my ivory in myriads of ways
shadows and contours emerge in ways never seen before,
I am never quite able to roll off the edge, even if a part of me begs

A seesaw's screech is the tune that accompanies me
its timbre pulsates through me
and reminds me of my hollow, twisting being
Am I losing? Am I winning?

I wonder why I ever sat down
with the player of this game I must see
they hover above incessantly,
watching me with a mirthful smile
Am I losing? Am I winning?

(The chair behind me is long empty,
as is the one in front of me.)



"Two Weeks"

Liliana Hopkins

The Note You Never Read

by Izabella Del Monaco

Oh the stars look lovely tonight...
And I wonder will I dare to reach them ?
And if for every life ever lived, in the universe there shines a star
Then surely I will transcend into something so much more..

More than the scintillating city now appearing so trivial
Rushing with taxis and anxious strides attempting to out race the threat of a clock
More than the perilous glances of strangers as they pass me by
Tantalizing whispers not faint enough as they would hope,
As I would hope..

In this lonely planet I've resided but never felt home
I have been seemingly of alien origin
Speculated , ridiculed and persecuted
Wandering aimlessly like an invisible vortex in the cosmos

The people with white coats, they noticed my anomalies
They locked me in a blinding fluorescent white room
Fed me chemicals and passed their studies along to one another
I broke free from them one day, but still I see their faces like ghosts

Here now standing on this ledge, I have never felt such belonging
The clouds of dusk have engulfed that perplexing gem in the sky
And they pour out crying unto the Earth
Unto this bridge and unto me

The cold drizzle clings and rolls off of my skin
A million little droplets embracing all of me as I am
My eyelids shutter and come to a gentle close
And I wonder for a second if I am ready to fly

Although there is some peculiar ambivalence about tonight
That wishes to rekindle my desires for this world, for myself
I am sorry, I cannot stay here
I cannot persist with this void trying to be whole when I am broken

I will return to the stars
From the dangerous fires from which I was formed
And when you look up into the obscurity and you see a lambent star,
Think of me..
Think of us..

Pacifist Lover

by Sariah Sanchez

You take me to see
The coral honeysuckle of our
Dear mountains of Vernon
Still I fell for the purple echiums of Big Sur;
Pronounced toxic by the state but
What could be worse than falling back to
where I was? who I was.
Not so far off but I swear to myself
That the Pacific waters will have promise
For my pacifist heart and most of all
Get me away from your
Damned back-pocket love.
I wanted more than shared vision
But we were and are
Just far too small to understand.

Invasion

by David Tsai

At Utah, Omaha, Juno, Sword, and Gold,
The Atlantic Wall was a work to behold.

Its defenders disciplined, ready to fight –
Aware and scared of their enemies' might.

The soldiers at the wall could not retreat –
Their battered country staring at defeat.

On the sixth of June, the attack began,
Invaders killed before reaching the sand.

The allied soldiers scrambling to the beach!
Some inspired by their general's speech.

Medic helping a soldier who is shot;
Suddenly, both of them killed on the spot.

The Wehrmacht soldiers were doing well.
Then their pillboxes felt the naval shells.

Additional tanks could not be brought forth
Since their leader feared an attack in the north.

The tide of the battle started to turn.
“We are overmatched,” the defenders learned.

The Wall was captured by the invading horde.
Such was the beginning of Overlord.

The defenders accepted they had failed,
Their country destined to not prevail.

For the victors, it was their finest hour –
One nation on path to superpower.

Ojalá

By Anthony Giamanco

After many long and dark nights of the soul,
I turned within,
and with a wish,
grew metal wings
with-out.

Three flights I had taken
Up,
from the hell I descended,
over marshlands, and the
Great Marbled Swamp,
through palm trees,
and on gusts of sea-breeze, past
the Strait of America,
beyond the Tropic of Cancer.
A condor soaring towards
the Andes,
where Mother Ayahuasca resides.
In there,
which lies a fragment of
the Garden of Eden.

A note echoing on the scale of divinity.
Apollo once sat here,
perched, as a parakeet,
plucking on ancient, tensiled twines,
Calling for Artemis,
his twin, lover, sister.
She comes in different,
fabulous garbs,
to hunt and honor
the fauna of eternal spring.

Breastfed cherubim
bathe by water bottle streams
along busy sidewalks,
and perfumed by car exhaust.
Joie de vivre, enfant!
For you run through the good
men and women
with smiles freely,
alongside the gratified walls
invoking spirits in
alleyway murals.

But when His
Sun rests behind
rolling bosoms'
nipples peaks,
Stags,
once thought Hunters,
are consumed by
their dogs.

Pop-pop-pop
Sounds of metal-slingshots
fire in the night.
The same ones used as
wedding bells.
Los ladrones are creeping,
with rusted machetes.
Jaguars prowl.
The foxes guard hens.
Typhon extends his jaw,
and devours their nestled eggs.

Still,
Rejoice!
A flock of parrots caw,
from the mount on high,
and Annunciates a Second
Renaissance,
in las calles of el
Brave Nuevo Mundo

Do not just take my word for it.
I'm just a foreign satyr.
Careful of your naïveté,
but I invite you to taste
at Aphrodite's seder table.
In the rose garden,
Under the tree where the
flowers first germinated
an apple into being,
And the snake first slithered up
from the roots, to trunk, and then hid
in the leaves to sleep,
his head framed by foliage like a
lion's mane.



“Contemplating and Conversing”
Milene Escoto

Efflorescent

by Rohan McMillan

The looming shadows of the trees reach towards me. Their bark claws extended. I near the border of the Crooked Forest. A forest so dreadful that even darkness itself fears what's inside those gnarled roots. I feel the hair on my arms stand up on end as I toe the dirt with my heeled boots, awaiting my perilous descent into the dark.

I take my first step in as the once joyous wildlife of La'Morsen disappears. The forest has a preternatural feel to it as the ghostly eyes in the trees all turn to face me as if I were an intruder. I am an intruder. Branches graze my skin and roots threaten to trip me as I push my way through the nodose brush. I have one goal—find the king of the Crooked Forest and slay him to conquer this territory for my own.

Three days pass as I find myself in a clearing. The shadows thin as the moon reflects off the pool in the center. Finally, a bit of peace, I think to myself as I go to sit on the cold rocks near the water. I take a swig from my flask before deciding to get some rest before continuing on my journey. Seconds turn into minutes and minutes turn into hours as I fall into a deep slumber under the scintillating moon.

Morning comes. I jolt awake as wretched nightmares pull me to the surface. Bags sit under my eyes as I clear my mind of those vile creatures that tore away at me in my dreams; my limbs made of sand. I feel a bit of unease at the fact that the forest is no longer quiet. It sounds awake as if suddenly all evil had come to perish in the hours of the night. Birds coo on branches, dragonflies dance over the water, butterflies flit about. On edge, I glance around and see nothing out of the ordinary, so, I proceed to make my way towards the water to clear my face. Leaning over, I carefully scoop a handful of water up and watch as excess trickles through the gaps in my fingers. I splash it over the skin of my face and take a deep, shaky breath. I lean back over the water to look at my reflection, but it wasn't what I had expected. It is my own face, but instead of a frown, there is a smile looking back at me. I narrow my eyes and lean in closer as the face swirls and slowly a black spheroid shape begins to rise up and out. Jolting backward, I scramble back onto the grass, drawing my sword.

"Who- what are you?" I demand towards the spheroid as it comes nearer.

It flutters for a moment before finally responding, "Who are you?"

I muster what courage I have and respond as calmly as I could, "I am the fae High King Ayen of La'Morsen Kingdom. I have come into this forest seeking the one in charge."

The dark spheroid continues to stray closer to me as if observing my very being. I want to turn tail and run, but I hold my ground as my grip tightens around the hilt of my sword.

“You are speaking to the very one,” the spheroid finally replies as it starts to flicker.

“Ah, how impolite of myself to impose on your grounds. I have welcomed myself into your forest at great haste to claim it as my own. You are a threat to my people and I wish to conquer all that you have,” I tell him directly, my sword ever so closer.

Instead of being met with fear, the spheroid seems to flicker brighter as a booming laugh came through. “You foolish fae, you could not simply match my strength. However, I do find your courage quite amusing. No fae has ever dared walk into these woods demanding such a thing, I like it.”

I am taken aback by his sudden laughter and questionable compliment. “I suppose a thank you is warranted. Though I do take minor offense to such insult, however, you have my attention.”

The spheroid stops flickering and grows darker, “I tell you what, come back to this clearing for three nights and prove your worth to me and you may find the odds in your favor.”

“How do I prove my worth?” I ask, but I am met with no response as the spheroid fades out of existence.

I spin around with the premonition of an attack, but nothing happens. The wildlife that fills the area begins to fade once more as the shadows engulf the clearing. I feel as if I was being scrutinized by the very forest itself as those opalescent eyes of the trees focused on me. I surreptitiously make my way out of the clearing to join forces with the shadows and find rest elsewhere. I would train for the day, finding what strength I had inside to face that darkness once again for three nights to come.

I train and train and train until the very first night arrives. I make my way back to the clearing as I wait patiently for the spheroid to return. No one comes, so I begin to search the area. As I lay in wait, I hear a cry pierce the air, a howl of pain. I immediately draw my sword and pivot on my heel to face the direction from where it came. Just outside of the clearing inside the dark forest is a baby deer stumbling about. Following behind the deer quickly are dark creatures of enormous size, their very being stomach-churning. They have large heads of mangled black hair with twigs sticking out at all angles. Their bodies dark grey with grooves from where fungi grow.

I cautiously approach as the creatures stalk the poor injured fawn, my sword at the ready to strike if need be. They don't notice me as I slink through the brush and merge with the shadows; my footsteps ever so cautious to avoid rogue sticks and leaves. Their looming forms fell upon the fawn as it let out another cry for help. I find myself, in a moment's notice, at her side with my sword swinging. I slice into the first creature as my sword plunges through its body. I pull back stumbling slightly as I rear around to hatch through the next, my sword piercing its throat just as fast as I kick off its chest to land a finishing blow on the final fiend.

The fawn shakily makes her way onto her feet as she bows her head at me. I look confused, maybe even startled, as I bow my head back at her. I watch as she runs off, a larger female deer rounding the corner in a panic to get her child back. I can't help but wonder to myself if this was a trial.

That night I return to the forest too wary of the clearing to rest there. I find it easier to fall asleep this time as I think about the day's rescue of the poor, helpless fawn. I wade through pitch-black rivers and vines until I decide to camp with the remaining sunlight. By the time morning comes, I find myself on my feet and ready for the new day and adventure. I once again make my way back towards the clearing as I waste time training to arrive at nightfall. Light barely filters through the branches as I travel, but it's enough for me to get around safely- for the most part.

I walk, and I walk, and I walk. It seems endless as I make my way towards the clearing, never reaching a destination. I swear I'm going in the correct direction, this is how I've been returning. Why would it be any different? My thoughts go unanswered as still there is no clearing in sight. Frustrated, I sit down on a nearby rock as I put my head in my hands to think. What could I be doing wrong? I stay there for some time before an idea pops into my head. Perhaps I have been going in circles this whole time, the forest is trying to outsmart me. I draw my sword as I continue on my way in the direction I believe to be the clearing. Time is ticking as it grows darker and darker, the shadows sapping away the little light the trees have. I cut grooves into the trees to mark my path as I silently slip by undercover. Just as I hypothesized, I am met with my knicks, I am in fact going in circles.

"Hear my voice, forest, for I am here to stay. Your duplicity falls on sharp-witted eyes and ears. I have figured out your plan of deception and I hereby cast it away!" I shout to the forest around me, my arms fling outward to assert my authority. There is a creak as the trees sway before they begin to part away through the dense thicket. I follow along and run as fast as my feet can carry me as it becomes darker and darker. A path opens before me and at every step, flowers blossom out of the grass. I can't help but smile at the sight, but soon it's enveloped by darkness. The clearing comes into view and I rush into the center as the moon reflects off the pool as it did on previous nights. Once again, the spheroid is not waiting there for me. A wave of emotions hit me as my fists curl into balls before I sigh and take a deep breath. Sitting down on a rock near the water, I curl up into a ball using my cape as a blanket to get my night's rest.

The next day comes, the morning sun before the last moon of these special days. I gather my belongings together and begin to train once more as the Crooked Forest is much too dangerous to risk falling out of practice. I must protect my kingdom. I will slay the king of this forest.

Just as fast as the day had arrived, it is gone. The moon shines high above me as I look up with a determined look. On the third night, I will face whatever the forest has planned for me. I look around and find that nothing is happening, so I look into the pool of water. Similar to the first night, my face contorts.

Out of the water rises the spheroid once more as it hovers and flits about. "I see you have survived the trials so far, impressive," the familiar voice booms.

"To be expected of a noble king like myself. It is the third night, I am ready to face the final trial," I say back all while furrowing my brows through already narrowed eyes.

"Patience, for you will need it in this final act. I will have you battle me unto death, the better king standing last," he says sternly.

I immediately straighten as my full attention goes to his floating form. I am to fight him to the death? While it does not seem easy, I am sure I can do it.

The spheroid descends to the ground as it begins to twist and turn, its very self distorting. Up grows a 6'6 pale man in dark purple to the point of almost black chitin armor, a helmet obscuring his face to only leave a large toothy grin exposed. Behind him attached to his back are long cicada wings that start from black and fade to a translucent red. He wields a large glaive that he swings around to be in front of himself, his lips widening into a determined smile.

"En garde," he growls and lunges for me as fast as light itself.

The two of us trade blows as metal strikes metal, glaive against sword. We continue like this for what seems like an eternity until we're both out of breath and panting. Just as I think the fighting will stop, his glaive knocks me from underneath and I fall over my legs onto the ground sprawling out. He stands above me, cold metal against my throat as it just barely pierces my tender skin. I suck in a breath as I prepare for my final moments only to be halted by laughter.

"I will not kill you, young fae. You have been a most formidable opponent. No creature wanders into my domain seeking what you seek. No creature wanders into my domain to disturb the peace. No creature wanders into my domain to steal my home. You are most interesting and I would like to keep you," he laughs as he draws his glaive away from my skin and tosses it to the side, offering a hand to myself.

I take his hand and haul myself up as I ask, “but why? I am your enemy and I have come here seeking to end your bloodline.”

“If I had thought you of a real threat, you would have been long gone by now,” he scoffs and places his hands on his hips. “I do enjoy taking the form of your people, it is much more freeing.”

Just like that, the tall man begins to take a knee in front of me. He slowly pulls his helmet off his head as long black hair cascades over his shoulders. His eyes shine with a vibrant red that could strike fear into enemies, his features sharp.

“I am darkness itself, though you may call me... Vesren. I am quite fond of that name. Ruler of the Dark, Vesren, at your service. You have passed my trials of heart, wit, and strength. Utmost respect is bestowed upon you and I take you as my king. Great courage and defiance come with great rewards. Please allow me to serve you as your knight,” the man smiles politely.

I am quite dazed by his words. Never had I expected this situation to come to this. I came here to kill this man, yet here he was on his knees ready to serve me just because I am a good man in his eyes. How ironic, I think.

“If I accept, you must pledge your loyalty to the throne of La’Morsen and never betray us. For if you do, I will have your head on a pike as a reminder of what those in the Crooked Forest have to face,” I growl with a stern look meaning business.

“That is all a man can ask for, a second chance,” Vesren stands and bows. “You have my thanks. I will not disappoint as you have not to me.”

The two of us begin our trek out of the Crooked Forest, a bud left behind in that clearing that slowly begins to bloom, a bud of new opportunities.



“Horse in Motion”

Luis A. Torres, Jr.

The Never-Ending Journey

by David Tsai

It is 10 am near Kaifeng, east-central China in early 1948. Few soldiers are around because almost all are away fighting and disorder is everywhere. Merchants will not go out and sell their goods because they are afraid of being robbed. The roads are filled with poor people looking for food, which is scarce. Everyone's future is uncertain. It is the Chinese Civil War and the Communists are winning because it seems like they will be less corrupt than the Nationalists.

In the house of a wealthy family, bandits have broken in and hold a father, mother, and their seven-year-old daughter captive. These bandits are aligned with the Communists, and like the Communists, they have a huge animosity towards rich and educated people. The bandits ransack the house, taking whatever they want. Tables are flipped over and furniture is destroyed. Two of them search some cabinets and take out clothing. They then approach the mother.

Already knowing the clothing belongs to the family, one bandit holds out a shirt and asks the mother, Puo Puo, "Is this yours?" because an answer of "yes" gives the bandits reason to kill the father, mother, and daughter.

"No, no," Puo Puo responds, waving her hands and shaking.

The bandit puts the shirt into a sack.

Watching this unfold, the father, TC, has to keep quiet but is planning in his mind how to flee the Communists. TC is heartbroken at what he is witnessing but there is nothing he can do. Many valuable items that have been passed down for more than ten generations are simply taken. The mother, Puo Puo, has ancestors who were high ranking officials in the Ming and Qing (pronounced Ching) dynasties and inside the house are the large jade necklaces they wore to show their position.

The bandits hold out these necklaces and ask Puo Puo again, "Are these yours?"

"No, no," she replies, shaking and with tears streaming down her face.

Again, the bandits place these necklaces in their sack.

However, the bandits are not satisfied with just taking whatever they want, leaving the house in shambles, and seeing the family in tears. They see the nice clothing from the drawers. It's much better than their clothing which is dirty, full of holes and has patches all over. As a result, the bandits loathe the family and they want to bury the father, TC, alive. An anguished Puo Puo, then desperately pleads with them saying they took everything they wanted and she only asks for her husband's life. She goes on crying and asking for some time. Eventually some of the bandits feel bad for her and her husband's life is spared. What Puo Puo has accomplished is not an easy task. In most similar situations, the husband would have been killed.

TC, Puo Puo, and their daughter, Xiao Jie, (pronounced Sheow Jeh) had almost avoided this event completely. They knew the Communists were coming into power and they had planned to travel over 1000 miles to the coastal city of Shanghai, where they would board a boat to Taiwan, a Nationalist stronghold. The previous day, they gathered what belongings they could take and left their house. To eventually get to Shanghai, the family started traveling down a road hoping to get to a particular city twenty or so miles away. From there they would board a plane which would fly two hundred miles southeast in the direction of the coast. After landing, TC's family would then travel the rest of the way to Shanghai on foot. Unlike most people fleeing, TC, Puo Puo, and Xiao Jie had caught a huge break. They have a distant relative who is a general in the Nationalist Air Force and relatives contacted him to arrange the two-hundred-mile flight for TC's family.

For travelling on the road, TC and Puo Puo had bought clothing poor people would wear and applied makeup to look disheveled so they and their daughter would not stand out. Puo Puo also sewed small gold bars into the lining of her daughter's coat, because people likely would not think of searching her. The three did a good job of blending in with others right after they left their house. Still, this is wartime. There were no soldiers available to keep order and a few hundred yards further, bandits controlled the road to the city where their flight would be departing from. They would likely search the family, see they were rich people disguised as homeless people, take all their belongings and maybe kill them. As a result, TC, Puo Puo, and their daughter, Xiao Jie, turned back and tried a different road. Again, this road was impassable for the same reason. The family tried walking down other roads, but one by one they saw that the bandits controlled each of them. TC, Puo Puo, and Xiao Jie had no choice but to return to their home. The next day, bandits would break into the family's house, hold the three captive, and take much of what they had planned to bring to Taiwan.

Now, the family is back in their house and TC has just avoided being buried alive. The bandits have just left, their home is a mess, and most of their belongings are gone. The house no longer looks like it had in the recent past when people would walk by and be impressed. However, the bandits don't know they did leave some items of value behind. TC is highly educated and has many American books that are still around. In 1948, these books are rare in China and they can be sold for a lot of money. Since taking these books to Taiwan is highly impractical, he gives them to poor relatives who are not targeted by the Communists and are staying in China. Many years later, TC, Puo Puo, and Xiao Jie will receive word that those relatives sold all the books and got enough money to pay for all their children's educations.

TC and Puo Puo understand they cannot worry about their home. They have to get to the city to catch their flight. Their plan is to travel at night when they will be harder to spot. That same day when it gets dark, the family takes the few belongings they have left and exits their house for the last time. The good news is that little Xiao Jie still has her coat with the gold bars sewn into the lining. They also don't know it now, but when the Communists gain control of China, this house will be made the town hall.

The three have difficulty traveling in the darkness, especially in the beginning. There is no electricity and obviously no light. After a while, they stumble upon a mansion. TC and

Puo Puo hope the inhabitants can help their family flee the Communists. TC knocks on the door and then lights a match to see what is written at the entrance. Very quickly, he and his wife realize they are at the headquarters of bandits and the family runs away before anyone can answer.

Just before sunrise, the three arrive at an abandoned house where they will remain until nighttime comes again. However, there's a problem. A mile or so away, Nationalist and Communist forces are fighting and the family can hear the small arms fire and the screaming of the wounded. There's a very real possibility that the fighting gets closer and stray bullets hit the family members. TC and Puo Puo decide to dig a hole in the ground big enough for them and their daughter so they can go inside. Any stray bullets will pass over them. Little Xiao Jie sees her parents working and she digs too. They use any object that can serve as a shovel and when they are finished, TC removes a door from the house to put over the hole for extra protection and so Communists don't see them. Then the three go to sleep so they will have energy to travel that night.

As sunset approaches, the three wake up. The fighting has stopped and they remove the door from above the hole. Puo Puo remembers that she has taken with her a little bit of family jewelry from the Ming and Qing dynasties to bring to Taiwan. She also realizes this can be an issue. If the Communists or Communist sympathizers find this jewelry with the family, the three will be considered wealthy and likely executed. Sadly, Puo Puo and TC agree to bury the jewelry in the yard of the abandoned house and lose this link to their family's history.

It's nighttime. The three are on the road. With the energy they gained from sleeping almost the whole day, they are able to travel a considerable distance, about 15 miles, and they reach their destination city. Many buildings here are abandoned as well because people have been fleeing from the Communists. Sunrise is coming soon and after searching for a place to rest, TC finds an empty school. The family goes to the second floor of the red brick building, enter a classroom, and rest there for the day. After a few hours, the three hear a man's screaming coming from the hallway. Puo Puo and her daughter look outside the classroom and see a dying soldier with blood on his clothes, suffering and crying. At that time, soldiers are so poorly equipped that they don't have proper uniforms so Puo Puo cannot tell which side he is on. It's a sad sight, but the three cannot help him because he could be a Communist and also because they have their own problems. Little Xiao Jie is shaken and begins to cry.

The family is in the city according to plan and intends to stay for three days. However, right now TC knows his family needs food. He takes a gold bar from his daughter's coat and decides to go outside to see what he can find. He exits the classroom, goes into the hall, and slowly and carefully tiptoes past the dying soldier. The soldier is crying and is in so much pain from his wounds that he doesn't even notice TC. Outside the school, there are no merchants selling food and TC must search a lot longer. He remembers he has another relative, a distant cousin, who is a farmer and lives just outside the city. Since there are no better options to get food, TC starts walking toward his relative's house. It's a two-hour walk and he worries about the dangers of stray bullets, explosions from artillery shells, and bandits. He passes a small elementary school where class is in session. The teachers and

students have no materials, so they use their fingers to write in the dirt. On a section of road, there is a cliff where poor parents go to with their babies who are half dead from malnutrition. Without food and with little money to support the baby, the parents feel they have only one option. They hesitate at first, but then gather the courage. Sometimes a parent who is carrying belongings in a backpack or sack loses grip of his or her baby and the baby falls and rolls over the cliff. The parents cannot stop. People are fleeing and want them to keep moving.

After navigating through, TC reaches his cousin's house. This cousin sees the fear in TC and drops everything he does so he can get TC two bags of corn on the cob. However, time is not a luxury TC has because he needs to get back to his family. Holding back tears, he leaves and thinks about the uncertainty he and his family will face in the future and the likelihood he will never see this relative again.

The journey back to his wife and daughter is more difficult. TC is beginning to feel fatigued and he is carrying two bags of corn as well. He passes the cliff where the babies are thrown over. At the bottom are tiny bodies, many partially covered with dirt and mixed in are pieces of garbage and debris. Most of the babies are dead. Desensitized to this type of suffering from years of war, TC proceeds on his journey without emotion, focused on getting back to his family. Many people are begging for food on the road but TC cannot give anyone corn because once people see he has food, they will swarm him and forcefully take everything he has.

After a long and exhausting walk, he returns to the abandoned school where his family is staying. By now the soldier in the hallway is unconscious and doesn't have much time left. Puo Puo and Xiao Jie are relieved to see TC has returned safely. The three embrace. Then TC puts the gold bar back into his daughter's coat and Puo Puo sews the lining closed. In two days the three are scheduled to depart from a nearby airfield. Right now though, little Xiao Jie is happy to have a break from walking and to be eating the corn her mother just boiled. Her sore feet can recover and she can sleep comfortably tonight.

The next morning Puo Puo and Xiao Jie look into the hallway and see that the soldier is dead. Xiao Jie quickly turns around and goes back into the classroom, too disturbed by the sight. The family then gets their few belongings together and plans on how to get to the airfield. Although the plane is scheduled to be there tomorrow, this is wartime and nothing is guaranteed. There is a decent chance the plane never shows and the three have to return to the abandoned school.

The sun rises the next day and TC, Puo Puo, and Xiao Jie exit the building. They try their best not to stand out. The fact that they have few belongings helps and as a result no one sympathetic to the Communists stops them. Soon, they make it to the airfield, slightly ahead of time. A Nationalist pilot greets the family and treats them especially well because his boss is TC's relative and a general. However, this relative is not present due to more pressing responsibilities from the war. With a lot of courtesy, kindness, and respect, the pilot guides TC's family to a cargo plane on the runway. Inside are watermelons, most likely meant to feed Nationalist soldiers, and TC, Puo Puo, and Xiao Jie are the only civilians allowed to board. The plane departs immediately. Although this plane is not like today's

planes and is much slower and less sophisticated, it serves its purpose. The plane is in the air for what seems like two hours before landing. The family is now farther away from the front lines of the war. Although they are in a safer place, they know they still have what feels like a never-ending journey ahead of them.



“Highways”
Bob Beischer

Poison

by Bonnie I. Burns

SCENE: A small kitchen in an apartment in Greenwich Village. A man is standing at the stove starting to get things ready to begin to cook. A woman is sitting at a small round table in the kitchen writing in a notebook.

Jack: "Why won't you ever have dinner with me? You know I like to cook. You always used to like my cooking."

Bibsy: "You know I do my best work at night. That's when my creative juices get going."

Jack: "What about your digestive juices? You've gotta eat."

Bibsy: "I would rather write. It's food for the soul."

Jack: "You could take a dinner break then go back to work."

Bibsy: "Maybe, but...". JACK interrupts

Jack: "What? Do you think I am going to poison you?"

Bibsy: "Maybe.... "

Jack: "WHAT ?!? I was joking!"

Bibsy: "That's not funny."

Jack: "We've been together 35 years. If I wanted to kill you, wouldn't I have done it by now?"

Bibsy: "Maybe you don't want to kill me. Maybe you just want to hurt me so I suffer. You have any idea what a couple of drops of mercury could do? They would wreak havoc on my liver, or maybe even cause a brain tumor!"

Jack: "Mercury? Why on earth would I do that?"

Bibsy: "I hear it's colorless, tasteless and odorless, but very toxic. I would never know."

Jack: "You're talking like a lunatic. I'm making steak. Do you want one?"

Bibsy: "You'd have to go to different drugstores to get the thermometers. Don't keep going to the same store. They'd get suspicious. They'd start asking: 'What's this guy doing with all these thermometers?'"

Jack: “Do you want a baked potato or yams?”

Bibsy: “But if you only use a few drops one thermometer would last a long time. A month if you’re lucky. They’d never catch you.”

Jack: “Not only do you think I am going to try to kill you, but now you’re telling me how to do it?”

Bibsy: “Do you want to dance?”

Jack: “Dance? Why would I want to dance? We’re in the middle of an argument!”

Bibsy: “Because you like to dance. Put the music on.”

Jack: “No, I am not going to put the music on. You are just trying to distract me.”

Bibsy: “What’s for dinner?”

Jack: “I changed my mind. I don’t think I’m gonna cook. I feel sick.”

Bibsy: “What’s the matter?”

Jack: “I think I have a fever. Go get the thermometer.”



"I Am Not Alone"

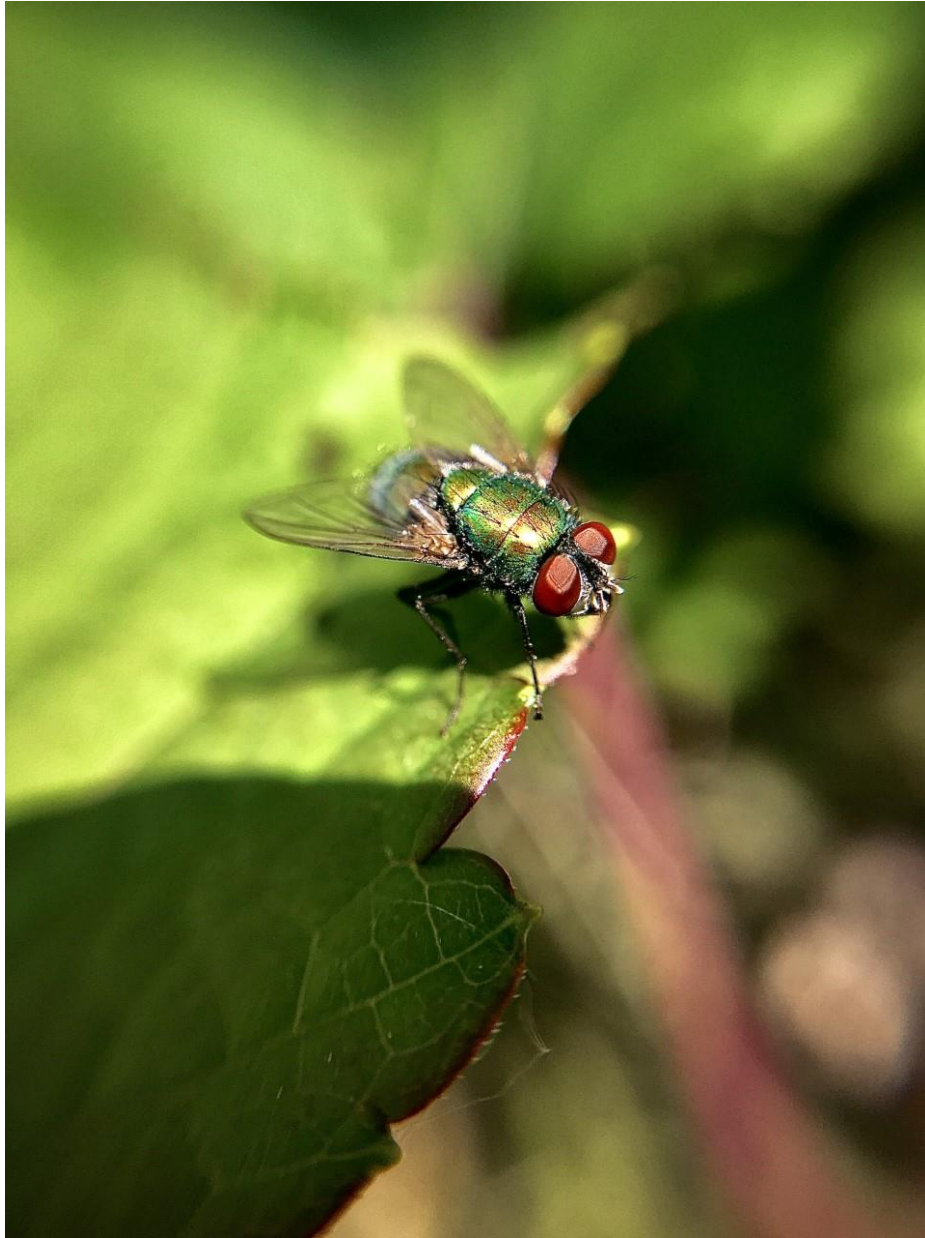
Grigory Vyazovskiy

Floodwood Mountain Reservation

by David Tsai

In New York State,
 Less than one hundred miles from Canada,
 Close enough that Canadian currency is commonplace,
 Lay Floodwood Mountain Reservation.
 Boy Scout camp where I spent two weeks
 Every other summer. Here, I don't have to worry
 About studying or music lessons.
 For meals, each person is required
 To cook, clean, or collect firewood.
 The cooking fire can be so unmerciful that
 Sometimes hair above my forehead is burned off.
 There are the scouts who like to play jokes on others –
 The latrine announces to everyone someone is on the toilet
 Because there is a space at the bottom that shows a person's feet.
 Mischievous scouts then take a bucket of water,
 Yell "Looks like rain!"
 And dump the water over the top of the latrine wall,
 Drenching the person inside.
 Except one time the assistant scoutmaster walks out.
 The prank dies quickly after that.
 In our campsite, we sleep in canvas tents.
 The floors are made of wood,
 Like pallets from a warehouse.
 One time a baby skunk
 Decides to sleep in one of the floors.
 The tent threateningly stares at its residents
 But the adults tell them to go in at night,
 Not scare the skunk and the scouts won't get sprayed.
 The next morning...
 Everything is ok.
 Soon after, we pack all our belongings onto canoes
 And paddle to a different island each day.
 We pitch our tents, cook dinner,
 And sleep there overnight.
 The next morning, we pack up
 And repeat the process on a different island.
 Midway through the trip
 We paddle to a convenience store.
 Away from civilization so long,
 Everyone rushes the store.

Where food isn't hung from a high tree branch
To keep it away from critters.
We wander about inside the store wearing life preservers.
Bright orange ones that search planes can spot.



“Fly”

Paula Hidalgo

Level E: Epitome

by Nilo-Enrico Neri

What defines love?
Someone once told me,
“When you’re able to stare at the sun
long enough for your eyes to adjust”
Someone once told me,
“When your hand lays empty
and you wish it was in theirs”
Someone once told me,
“It’s something that’s pure”
“It’s something that’s boring”
“It’s something that’s important”
“It’s something that’s stupid”
But through these descriptions,
love has no meaning. But only
through romance can love be found
beating, breathing, and berating
the participants. Making love
as deep, as the person defining



"A Dilemma"

Monica Bond



“Don’t Forget the Sunrise”

Daniel Gajee

The Embers

by Paula Hidalgo

I've got a mind that's
trapped in amber

How could I ever
not remember?

I trace it way back
to December

You threw me straight
into the embers

The Never-Ending Mirror

By Christopher Martinez

From nothingness to birth
Pure as you begin your descent into darkness.
Perfect
Not perfect.
Jagged edges
Straight lines.
Deeper into the darkness.
Alas—
The light.
It is all the same.
From nothingness to nothingness
From birth to death.
Here is where you will find your peace
The never-ending mirror.



"The Never-Ending Mirror"

Christopher Martinez

Judge Biographies

Pamela Hughes – Writing Judge

Pamela Hughes is the author of the eco-collection of poetry, *Meadowland Take My Hand* (Three Mile Harbor Press). She is the editor of *Narrative Northeast*, a literary and arts magazine that supports diverse voices and visions (LGBTQ and straight) and the environment. Her second collection of poems, *Femistry*, is forthcoming in late 2023 or early 2024. Her poetry and prose have appeared in such literary journals as: *Prairie Schooner*, *Canary*; *Literary Mama*; *PANK Magazine*; *The Paterson Literary Review*; *Thema*, and elsewhere. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from Brooklyn College. She has taught at Bergen Community College since 2008 and always enjoys being in the company of her students.

John Cichowski – Art Judge

John Cichowski received his MFA from the New York Academy of Art where he concentrated on portrait painting and anatomical study. He completed a postgraduate residency at Oxford University's Ruskin School of Art. He received his BFA from the School of Visual Arts where he majored in illustration with a concentration in graphic design. Dr. Cichowski also worked at the National Academy of Art and the Art Student's League of New York for eight years as a teaching assistant for Peter Cox (National Academician). He continues to draw and paint and has taken up digital photography using vintage manual lenses from the 1960s and 70s. He has been teaching at Bergen Community College since 2004.

